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Looking at a favorite ending in comics, writer Alex Paknadel aims his focus at Tom King and Jason Fabok's *Swamp Thing* story. [*PanelxPanel #19*]

EDITORIAL

Welcome to *PanelxPanel!*

If you've never read an issue of the magazine before, this is hopefully a good sampler of what we do every month, but I'd like to give a little explainer, too. We're a two-time Eisner-nominated magazine for Best Comics Journalism (2018 an 2019), that has been running since June 2017. So far, we've published 22 issues, with writing on comics of all kind.

Each issue has a feature comic, which is our cover. So the current issue, as this is released, features IDW/Black Crown's *Eve Stranger,* by David Barnett, Philip Bond, Eva de la Cruz, Jane Heir, and edited by Shelly Bond. Next month, our feature comic is Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips' *Criminal.*

For the feature books, each issue has a big in-depth interview with the creative team, as well as upwards of four essays/articles all about that comic. You'll see some examples of those in this sampler, taken from our *Mister Miracle, Young Animal, Immortal Hulk* and *Giant Days* issues. They discuss a wide-range of topics on the comics, from craft, exploring themes, or tangential relationships. But all serve to add some extra reading around those comics, and explore them further.

The second half of the magazine is the "Regulars," which always begin with a short comic. As well as that, we have an article called Big Talk, where collaborators interview each other, taking a unique spin on chatting comics.

Then there's Craft Corner, where a comics creator discusses part of their process. We've featured letterers, colorists, writers, webcomic creators, and more. In this sampler, we've got webcomics creator CB Webb talking about how she paces her webcomic, *Blanco*

After that, we have an open article/essay space called Solo, where we've had pieces on the male gaze and the *Buffy* reboot, letterer retrospectives, and upcoming ones on dogs in comics, how working in black and white influences design choices, and more.

And it always ends with Final Thoughts, where a critic or comics creator talks about their favorite ending in comics, and why it resonates with them.

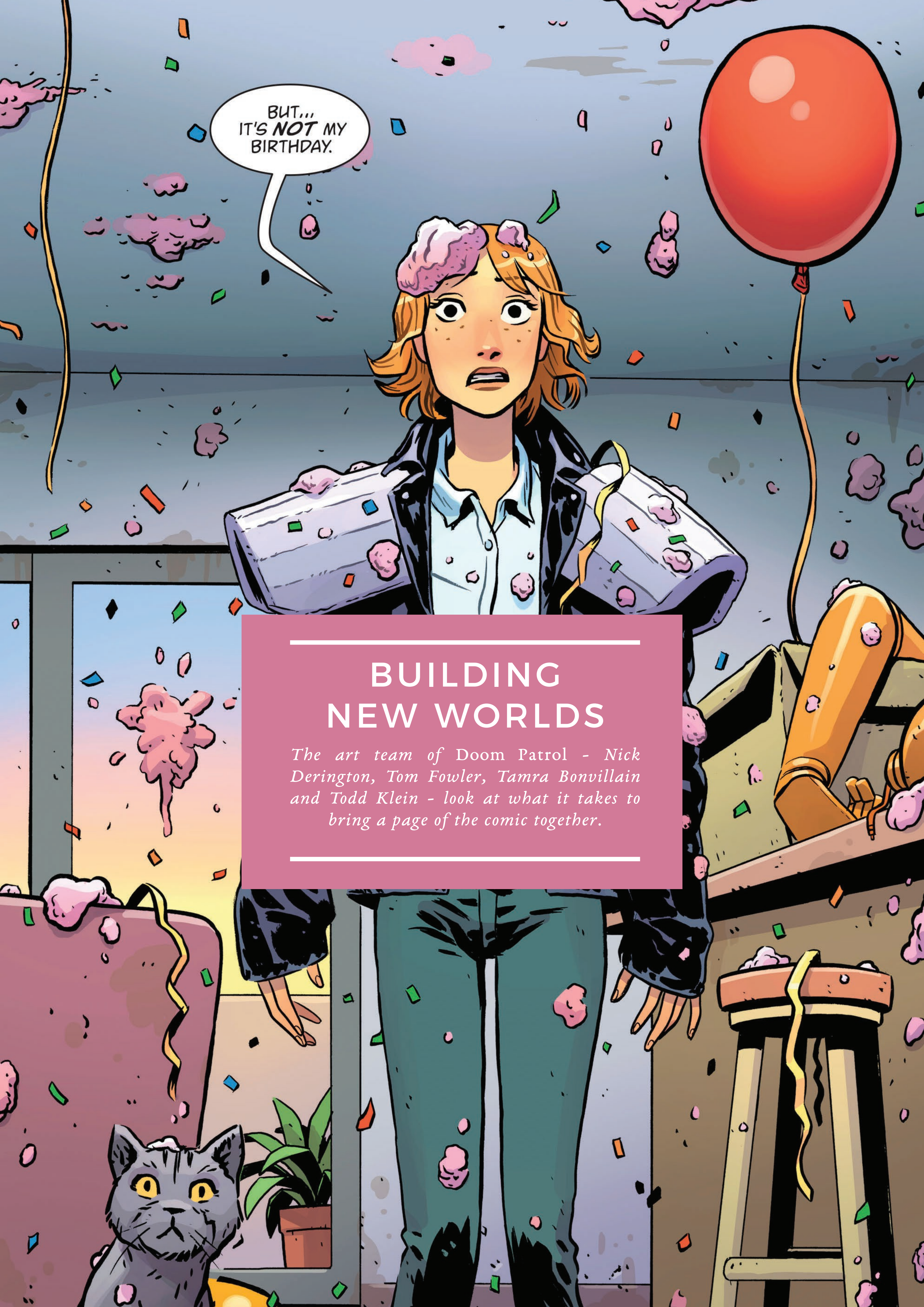
So in each issue we've got a whole bunch of great stuff, some themed and some unthemed, so there's always something for everyone. Hopefully this sampler shows off a little of what we do. And if you want to read more, you can get all the issues at gumroad.com/panelxpanel - every issue is just $2.50.

And along with this Free Comic Book Day sampler, we're also doing a one day subscription discount, of $12.50 for 6 months of issue, which gives you a free issue of the magazine with that subscription. Head to: gum.co/PXPSUB to find that deal.

So check out what we do, grab a subscription, and you'll get fresh issues of the magazine to your inbox every month, while also helping keep some great writing about comics going.

Hopefully we'll see you May 29th for our *Criminal* issue.

- Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou


BUT... IT'S *NOT* MY BIRTHDAY.

BUILDING NEW WORLDS

The art team of Doom Patrol *- Nick Derington, Tom Fowler, Tamra Bonvillain and Todd Klein - look at what it takes to bring a page of the comic together.*

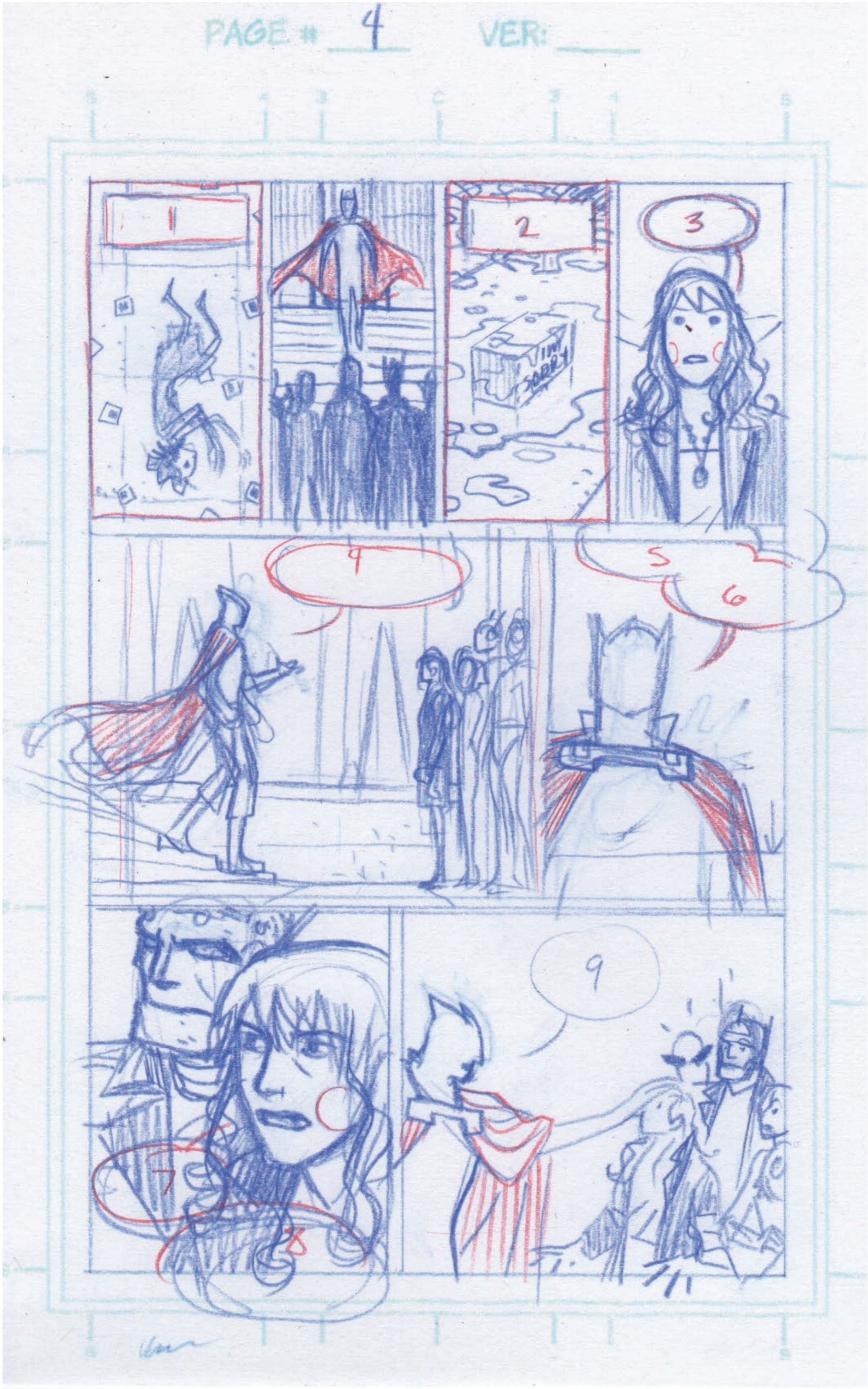
LAYOUTS AND PENCILS:

Nick Derington: The process was strangely elaborate for this second arc. I actually spent a whole weekend at Gerard's house and we brainstormed and mapped out all the concepts and story beats we wanted for the story. By the end we had a fairly strong issue by issue outline that was flexible enough that it could be scripted and adjusted to fit the creative whims of the following months of production ahead.

Gerard's final scripts have lots of description and elaborate ideas in them. They are packed tight with quirky character design concepts, page and panel layout ideas, and just random thoughts and ideas that help flavor the narrative we are trying to figure out. So I'll print this script out onto paper and start making tiny notes and sketches as I read through it.

The first read through I try to just fall into the narrative and only make a note if something extremely important comes to mind. I'll then go in and start making tiny layout sketches, pick apart any staging problems or character moments that don't feel right, or that could be made even stronger in little ways. I'll throw some of these notes and sketches of any important new characters, locations or objects at Gerard to get his thoughts.

We'll often go back and forth via text message trying to get the right look for a new character or some random weird element, too. I think we spent an hour sending potential Robotman shirt phrases back forth to each other before settling on "NO LUNCH" for this arc. I've got a list of probably 2 dozen shirt phrase that we worked through. It's dumb, but it's how we figure this stuff out. *Doom Patrol* is all about the dumb details.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After doing super tiny page layout sketches in the margins of the actual script, I will then do proper layouts at 5.5" x 8.5" (see previous). I'll work through the whole issue making sure all the visual elements and locations and characters are all working together. The layouts are fairly tight but I always wish I had made them tighter when I'm drawing the final page. It's easier to change things when you realize that something nots working at the layout stage.

When doing layouts for a comic, you're doing a dozen things simultaneously. Especially on something like *Doom Patrol,* where I know that Gerard is always open to me discovering a punchier idea while working on the final page.

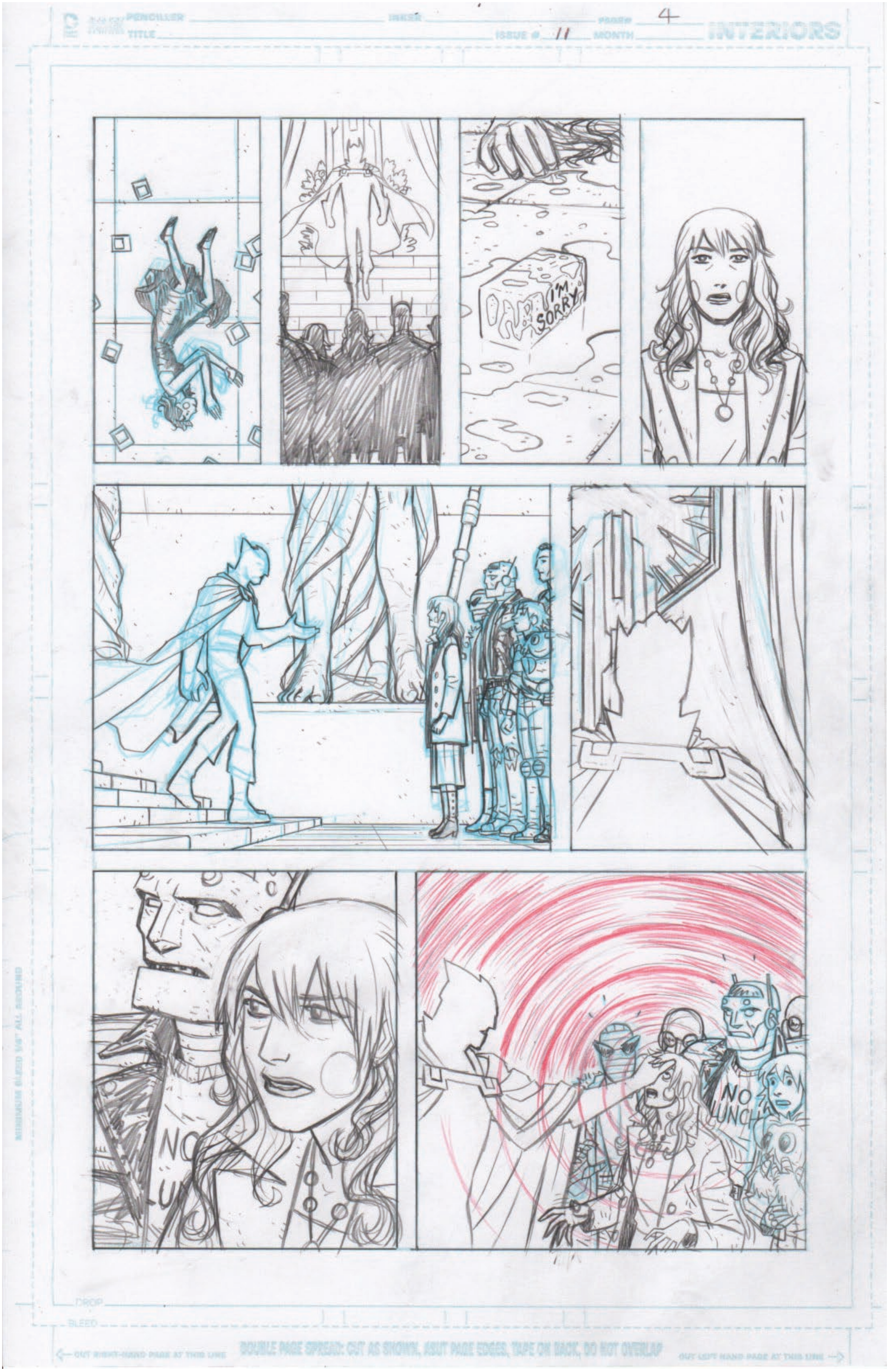
You are accommodating the script's basic needs (pagination, panel structure on the page, word balloon placement, camera angles, set design, blocking the scene, lighting) all while trying nail to the emotional thrust of the narrative and the project. Beyond just doing the basic storytelling, you're trying to find inventive and innovative bits to throw in as well. Things to make it special and fun. It's all a bit maddening. It's so complicated that you really just have to develop the skills to just trust your instincts for much of it, otherwise the process can be paralyzing.

So for a 22 page comic, I try to spend about 5 days doing this planning stage, and on this page, it's exactly as Gerard wrote it. He even had the panel layout figured out for it.

For *Doom Patrol,* my visual philosophy has been to keep things simple whenever possible. With Gerard's broad fanbase being drawn to the book, I wanted it to be as visually friendly and inviting as possible to an audience that may not normally read a bunch of comics. I also knew the stories would *batshit insane,* so I also liked the contrast of a simple storytelling style being used to delineate these strange adventures.

Occasionally in specific moments the visual storytelling elements do get weird and experimental and the contrast created makes those moments stand out as special and are hopelly more fun and notable.

The bizarre next to the mundane is very *Doom Patrol.*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INTERIORS
I'M SORRY
NO LUNCH
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CUT RIGHT-HAND PAGE AT THIS LINE
DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD: CUT AS SHOWN, ABUT PAGE EDGES, TAPE ON BACK, DO NOT OVERLAP
CUT LEFT-HAND PAGE AT THIS LINE

For inspiration I was looking at a lot of comics that used fashion and lifestyle elements. *Love and Rockets*. Hewlett's *Tank Girl* and *Gorillaz* work. Rafael Grampa. Otomo. The mundanity and structured quality of *Watchmen* also comes into play a little perhaps. Stuff that was crisp and cartoony and stylish but also grounded. Mike Allred's *Madman* has definitely had a huge lifelong influence on me and is what got me interested in *Doom Patrol* way before taking on the project.

In fact, there's a bizarre circular influence loop in play. Mike was deeply influenced by Premiani's *Doom Patrol* work only to have Mike's *Doom Patrol*-esque *Madman* work affect my cartooning tastes which then in turn led me to work on new *Doom Patrol*. I guess that's a 60 year line of cartoonists playing with these visual and thematic concepts and characters.

Anyway, once pencils are done it's on to inking. I had never been inked by someone else until working on this comic, so when the schedule demanded that I start using an inker, Tom Fowler was my first choice. I think I send fairly tight pencils but it's nice knowing that I don't have to. Tom is an amazing artist and even if something is a little bit loose or slighting undefined, he'll know what I'm going for and can make it work.

I've known Tom for a long time and we know each other's general aesthetics. His brushy and slightly cartoony way of drawing was a natural fit. I pencilled and inked the first 5 issues, which basically acted as a general style guide for what the book should feel like, too. But that said, I am always pleasantly surprised by the cool choices and quirks that will emerge during the process. Drawing comics is a very deliberate and precise process and adding other people's efforts into the mix brings an odd random thrill to it all.

Ultimately it was all driven by the schedule. Gerard's new script usually comes in right after the previous issue is finished, so it's immediately time to hop on the next issue and get it out the door as quickly as possible. It's also important to note that having an inker do the final step allows me a little more time to be thoughtful about the storytelling and design decisions. The back and forth that Gerard and I will do in designing everything and figuring stuff out can be deceptively time consuming, but it has proven to be an important part of the process.

For color work, it's definitely a similar relationship. Tamra is super smart and creative and it's easy trust her to do something interesting. The hardest part of the process with coloring *Doom Patrol* is that are just so many characters and so many locations and so many odd things that have to be designed. When I send off the black and white artwork I'll have a page of notes that explain anything that I specifically in mind while drawing certain scenes, and I'll often color a character sheet to show how a certain character should look. I'll even rough out a quick shadow guide if I had a specific lighting scenario in mind for a scene. But for the most part, I trust her to make bold and interesting choices. Again, it's always a treat when her pages start coming into my inbox.

On this specific page for instance, I thought that the flashback panels could be visually separated by shifting the color. Tamra thought it wouldn't look good and then I remembered that I had used a thicker panel outline in an earlier issue to signify a panel as a flashback. She may have even suggested the thicker panels. It's hard to remember since it's all such an organic process at times.

DP

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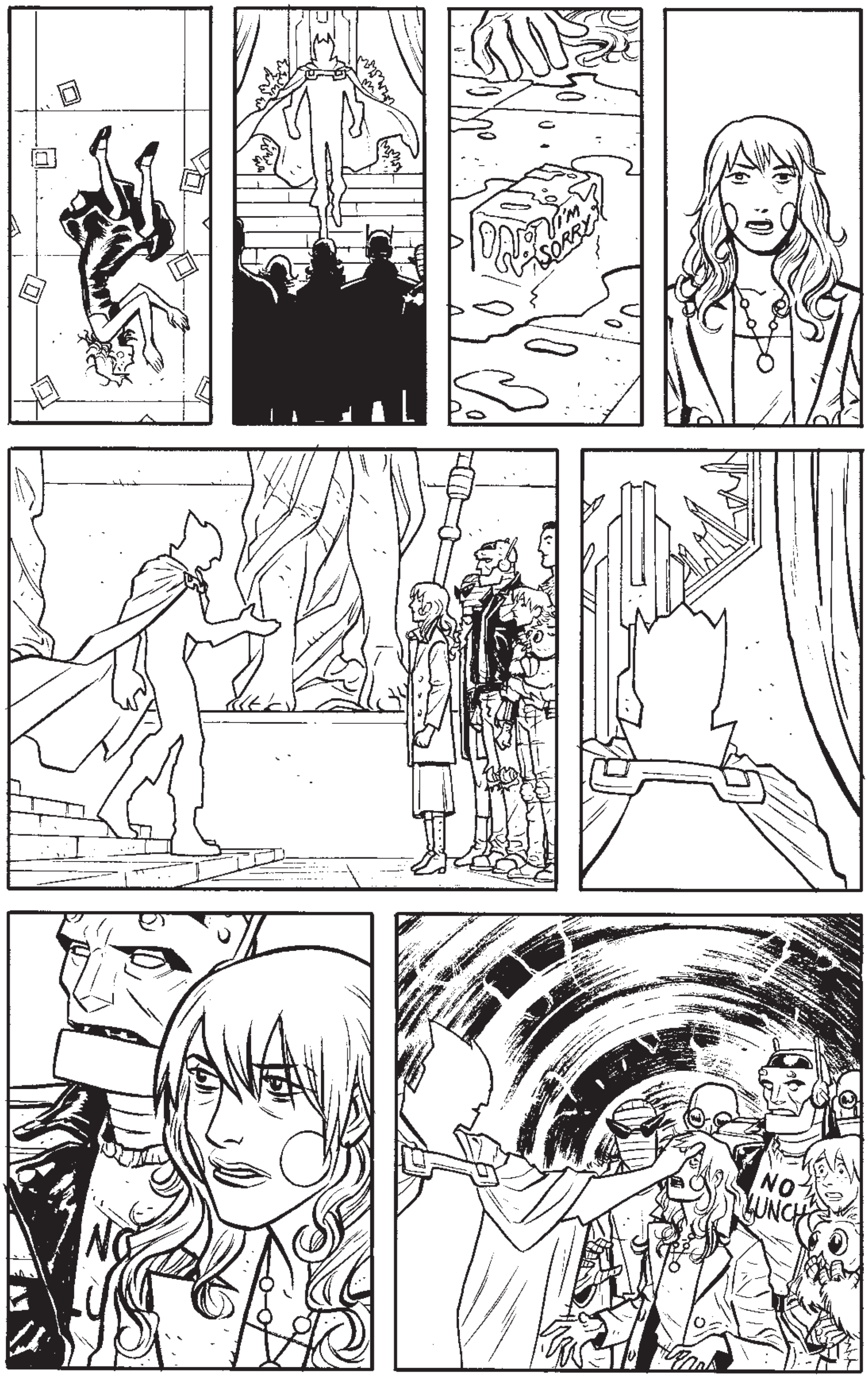

I'M SORRY
NO
NO LUNCH

INKS:

Tom Fowler: So, Nick sends me raw scans of his pencils at full size. I'm terrible with Photoshop, so I tend to stick with the bits I understand how to do. I'm sure there's a much quicker or cleverer way, but I'd tend to darken the pencils then turn them greyscale (Nick draws with a dark blue pencil), flatten them out some more, then make them CMYK and fiddle around with the sliders in utilities until I got them to the right blue for me (usually 175/100/75-80). Then I'd print them onto the same Strathmore 300 smooth, that I do most of my own comics work on. It's relatively cheap and easy to find and takes the kind of brushwork I like to do well. Beyond that, just about everything is done with a Raphael 8404 #2 and Pelikan Drawing A ink. The rest is just Microns, most commonly sizes 03, 05, 08.

I'm always looking at people like Tom Palmer, Al Williamson, Jack Davis, Frank Frazetta, and Wally Wood, but because Nick and Erica Henderson - who I inked on *Squirrel Girl* - both draw much more economically than me, I decided to look more at my European influences like Albert Uderzo and, believe it or not, Blutch.

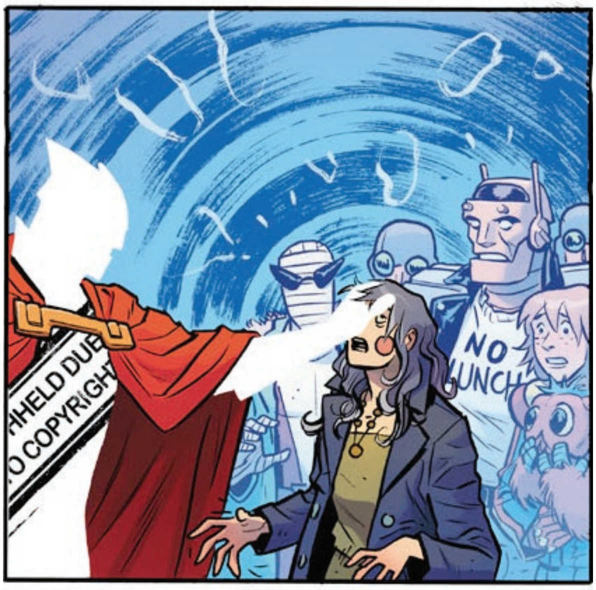
My work over both Nick and Erica were as much favors to friends as they were just an experiment to see how it would go. For me inking tends to be the fun bit. (Layouts are the real work of cartooning and pencilling the grind). If I bring anything to that part of the process, I think it's *volume*. I want things to look, to feel, like they're taking up and existing in a real, visceral space. Inking, embellishing, is where I'm able to give things weight and, hopefully, life.

COLORS:

Tambra Bonvillain: When it comes to palettes for a series, I always build as I go. This particular scene and the characters in it were almost all already established before this scene, so I start with that.

So, normally, I'd add in anything to a page that is already a known quantity, or if something is specified by Nick or in Gerard's scripts. If there's characters that have appeared before, and it's a new scene, I'll put those colors in first and build around that, or vice versa.

On this page, the only new element was the effect in the last panel. I chose blue to keep cohesion with the overall scene. We have a strong blue element earlier, and this helps keep things balanced out. After laying in base colors for a page, I often run a bit of adjustment on it to unify things a bit and push the mood. In this case, it was more subtle, but if it were a really dreary scene or something, I might desaturate or push the colors in certain directions to achieve different emotional effects.



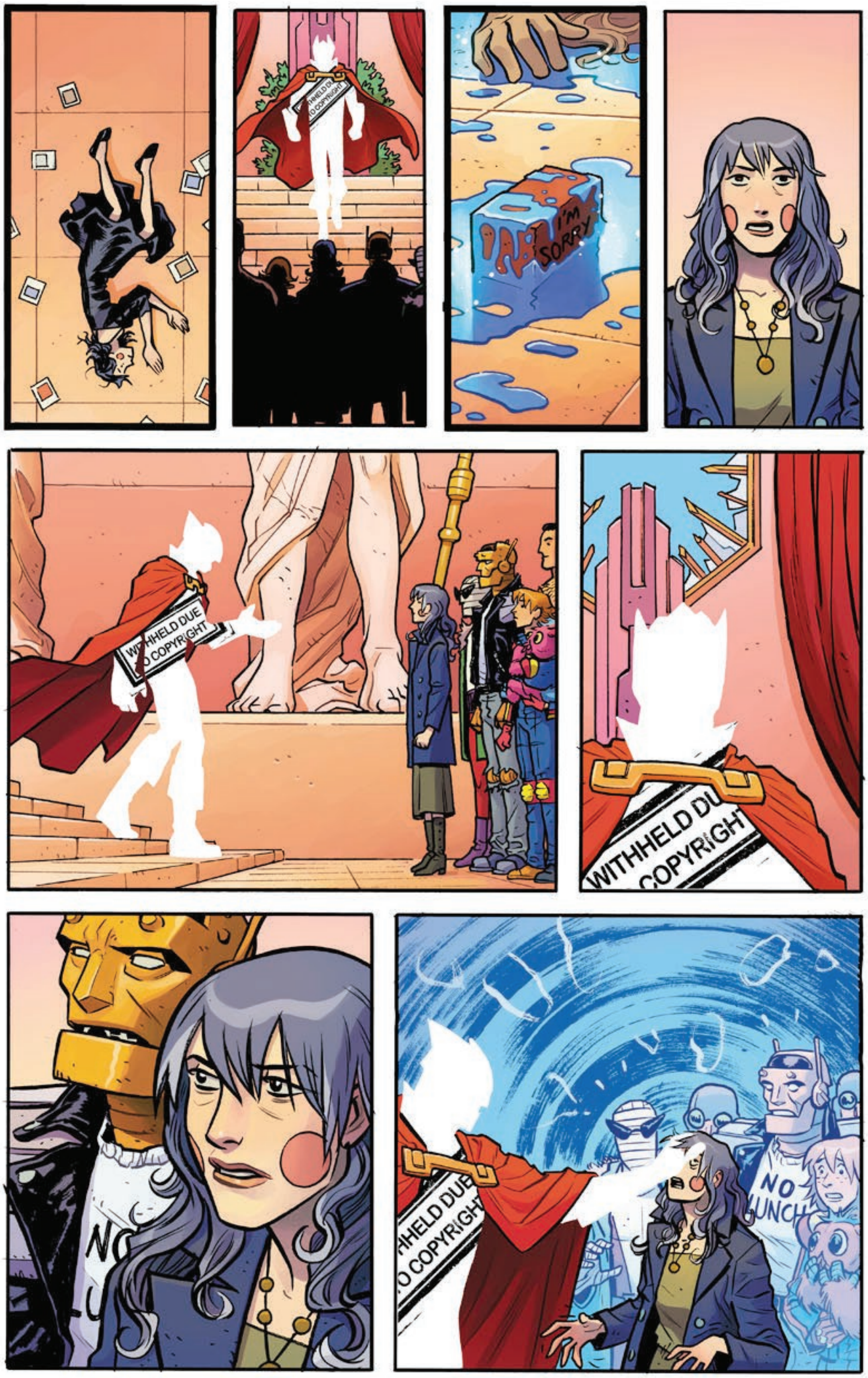
My preference is to work from the first page and then just go in order. It helps me maintain continuity. Sometimes, bouncing around can be complicated and I might end up making some mistakes. Though, if there's not much time between when I'm working on a book and when it's due, I might jump around and do like one key page from each unique scene, if they haven't been established in previous issues, so I know that everyone likes how that looks, rather than doing five pages or so, and there's a huge overhaul needed that affects all the pages.

I think leading with more gradients in my pages is probably just kind of my sensibility in general. I find it hard to describe, because I don't really approach it in a very analytical way. I had kind of an idea of how I approach another book with a similar style, but I always adjust to the specifics of the artist I'm currently working on. It's intuitive really, and I figure it out by doing it and just trying stuff, seeing what I like and don't like, and I'm sure it's changed over the course of the first few issues in particular.

Overall, my goal is to have, at a glance, colors that establish the mood and feeling of a page. You want to get all the details and more granular things right as well, but that should all be in service to enhancing what is going on in the story.

I approach things in a kind of methodical way, so there's almost a clear step-by-step process, and an endpoint that makes it easy for me to know when to stop.

Deadlines can certainly help you get over that desire to tinker!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LETTERS:

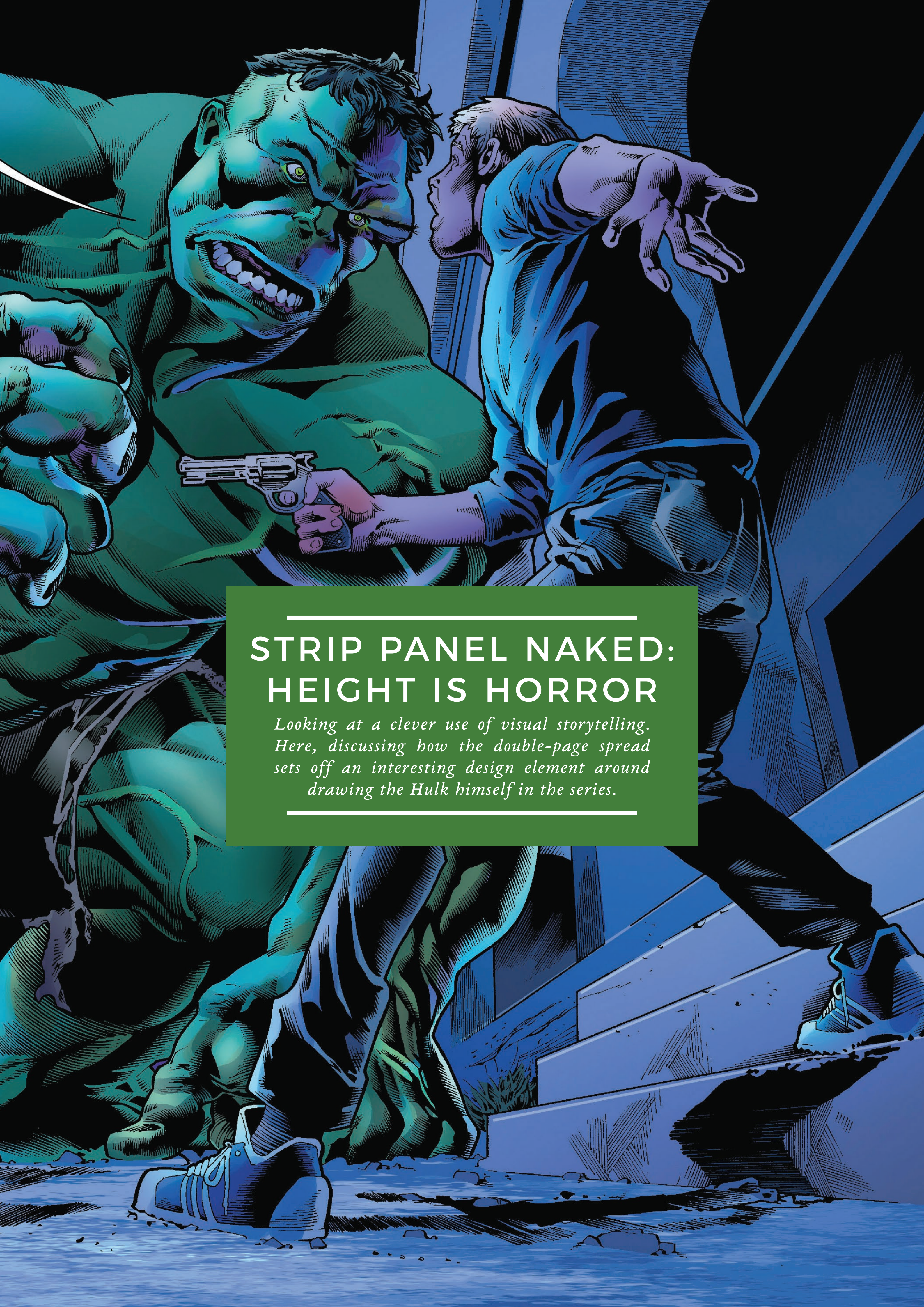
Todd Klein: I approach every project separately, finding the best solutions for each. In the case of *Doom Patrol,* I looked at John Workman's lettering on the Grant Morrison run for style cues. His regular lettering looks quite different from mine, but I adopted some of his style points, like opening balloon borders on the top and sides of a panel where it works, and wavy balloon tails. In the case of Mr. Nobody, Gerard Way specifically asked that I imitate Workman's balloon shapes, and I did that as best I could. Other style choices were mine.

I disagree with the often-repeated idea that lettering should be invisible. That concept must have come from an artist or writer. In my view, the letterer's job is to enhance and support the story and the art. Style choices, placement, size and importance of the lettering should all help the storytelling.

I compare lettering in comics to the music score in a film. When done well, both improve the final product, both have their moments of glory and prominence, and times when they take a background role.

On most DC projects, I am given a placement guide usually prepared by the assistant editor, who puts numbered boxes and ovals on a photocopy of the art, which is based on the lettering placement guide I wrote for DC. I don't always follow it exactly, but it gives me a good starting point, and clarifies which characters are speaking. After 40 years of doing this, I know what will work.

This article was originally featured in our Young Animal *issue, #21. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO14*



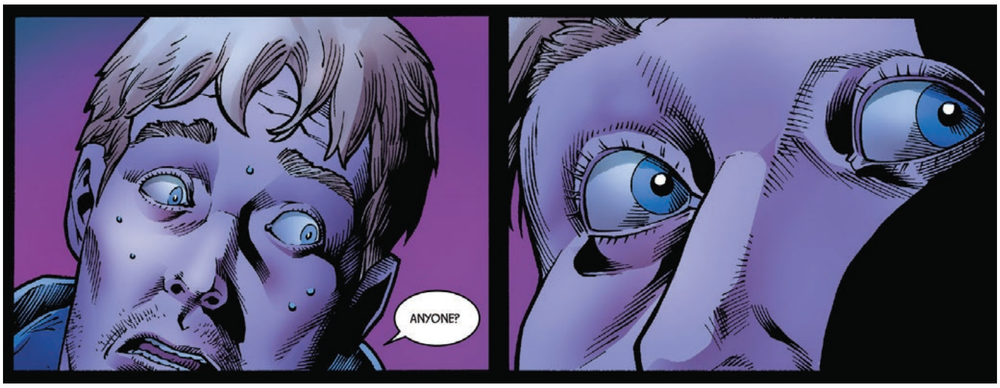
STRIP PANEL NAKED: HEIGHT IS HORROR

Looking at a clever use of visual storytelling. Here, discussing how the double-page spread sets off an interesting design element around drawing the Hulk himself in the series.

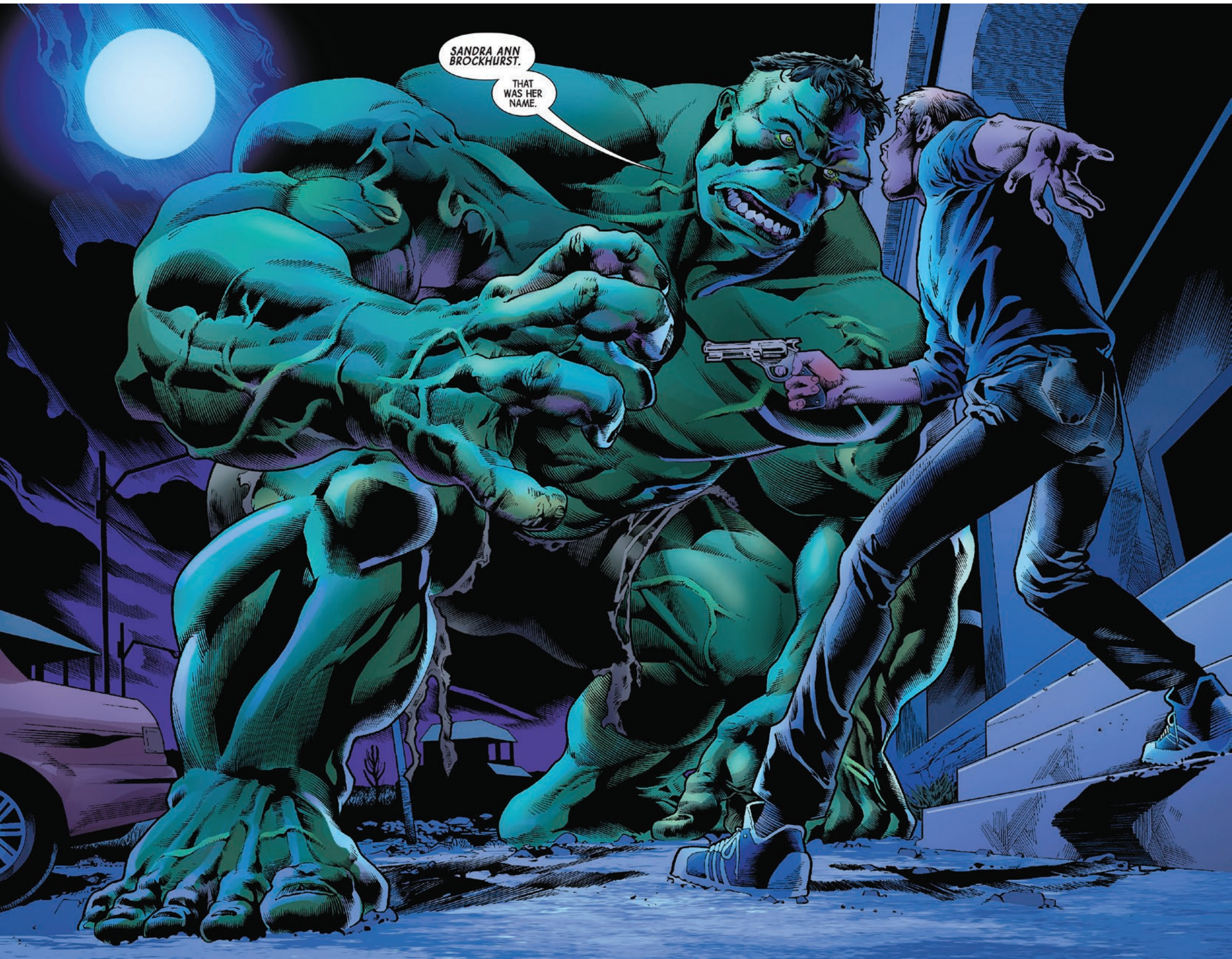
BY HASSAN OTSMANE-ELHAOU

There's a lot to talk about with the visuals of *Immortal Hulk,* a lot of interesting page designs with action, like the moments in the fifth issue, or the way replicating imagery plays off against each other, like the six-panel grids in the first issue. There is one thing that really caught my attention though, and I imagine it's the same for a lot of readers in the first issue, and it's the use of two back-to-back double-splash pages. It feels like a double-splash is more of a rarity in itself, with monthly comics' fairly short page length not necessarily lending itself naturally to use two of those pages (in many cases a tenth of the whole issue), so to see two is pretty interesting. Granted, the first issue is a little bigger an issue than normal, but it's still an impressive sight to behold.

The double-splash is basically the biggest unit you've got in a standard monthly comic - barring any elaborate folding out pages or anything - two pages opening on one image is as big as you can go, which already says a lot about the use of them. So when scale is on the agenda, it's the biggest and boldest you've got. So the first time we see one is on the reveal of the Hulk, naturally. Ewing and Bennett have hidden him away from most of the issue, instead focusing on the damage he causes to the other most dangerous thing in the comic, the gang that Tommy has been getting money for. He has effortlessly dispatched them, and now we're ready to see the reveal to Tommy.

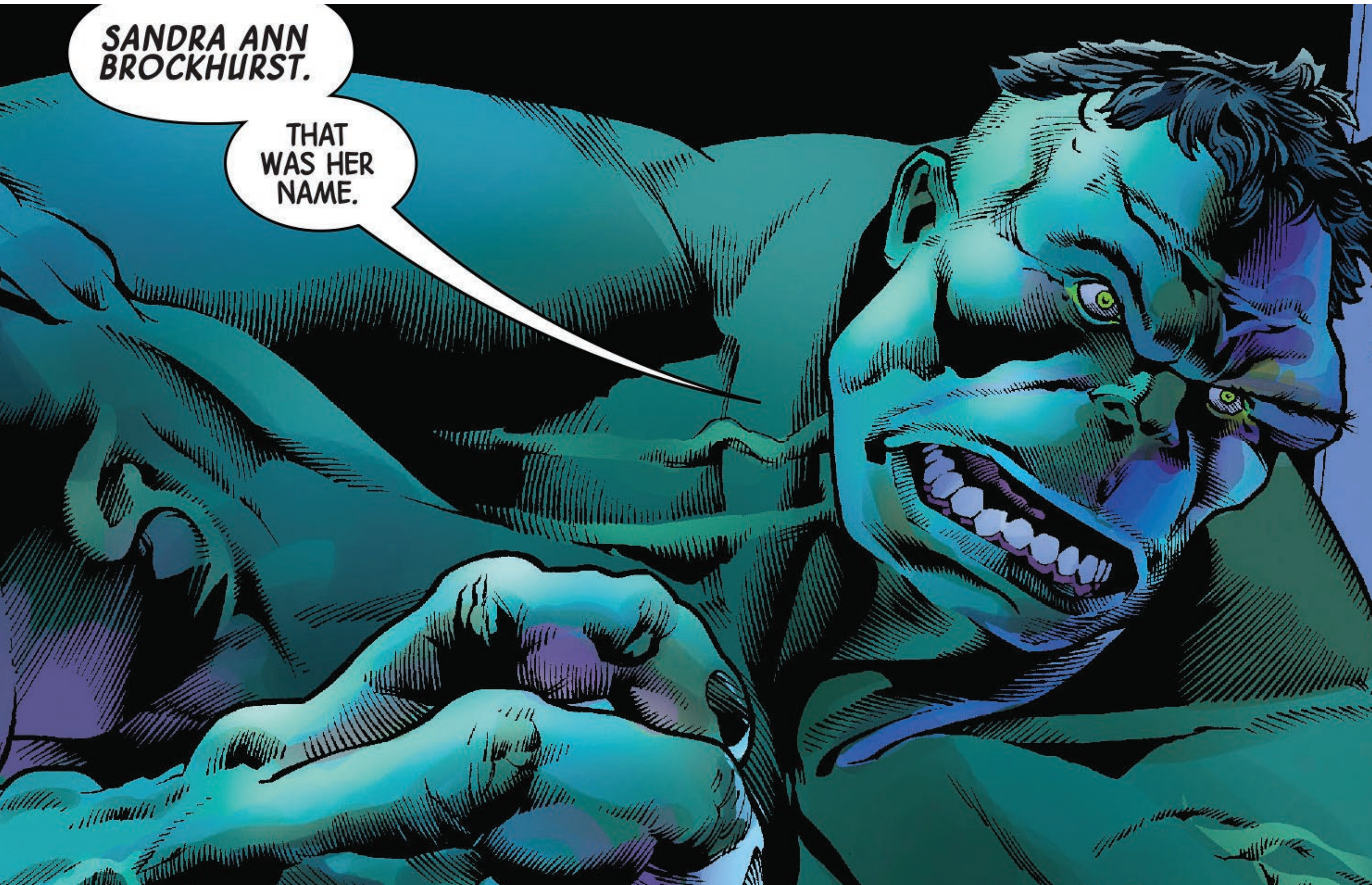


The set-up is excellent, too. It's classic horror, with a zoom in on the face of Tommy as he realises the monster is behind him, ending on a silent panel of his eyes as a shadow stretches out across his face, so we know where we're going. The beauty of a double-splash is it always occurs on a page turn, so as you turn the page you're suddenly hit with this gigantic image of the Hulk. The nature of the page turns means you probably end up seeing Tommy first, too, as he's on the right side of the page, so that's revealed first, then the Hulk comes in next. Subtle, but it's a nice touch to keep Tommy on that right side, so the Hulk is the final thing you'll likely see.

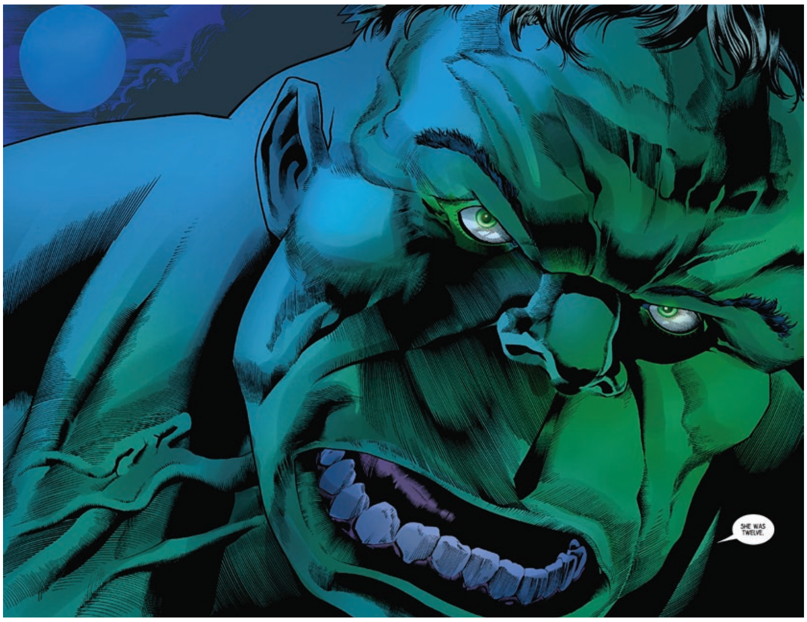

SANDRA ANN BROCKHURST.
THAT WAS HER NAME.

Going back to the idea of scale though, that's really everything this page is about, and luckily Bennett, José and Mounts know it. While Bennett's normal pencil work is somewhat detailed, it takes on another level on this moment. The spread interestingly ends up playing out like both a wide shot and a close-up, where the amount of detail rendered on Hulk is kind of hyper-real. The veins that wrap around his arms, his feet and the bone structure within them, all the sinew and flesh of his muscles, it all explodes from the page with detail. It's not just Hulk standing there, it's every bit of his reality, it's his skin and the skeleton underneath it, the layers of muscle writhing underneath. It's scary... because there's this sudden additional lump of reality stuck on it. It's got the amount of detail that typically you'd only manage in a close-up shot, because you don't want to bog down a wider shot on a normal page in too much unnecessary detail, but suddenly having a larger canvas to play with allows Bennett that option.

And yet, it's *still* a wide shot, it has to be, to fit Hulk in there in the scene. So it ends up combining these two extremes, of detailed and wide, to interesting effect. Ultimately it gives you the punch, probably the best use case of a double splash is exactly that, a big whallop to the experience of reading. Minimal dialogue, a threatening tone, but really this moment is about the visuals, and because of that it breaks the flow of the narrative established so far, intentionally of course, to build this moment of pause to generate grandeur. It's always a pretty ballsy move (also a reason we may not see it quite so often), but it pays off spectacularly here for the reveal.


SANDRA ANN BROCKHURST.
THAT WAS HER NAME.

Even more, it doubles down on the effect and does it again. You turn the page, probably expecting to go back into the story, instead you're greeted with an even bigger image, a close-up in large scale, Hulks face, his piercing green eyes, the definition in his forehead, the creases in his eyes, the inhumanly large philtrum. It's all up close and personal, the recognisably human elements of Hulk contrasting against the exaggerations, the things not quite sitting right on his face, noticing how small his nose and eyes are against the vastness of the canvas of his face. And you realise that the splash pages represent an a way of placing us into the scene as Tommy, he's accusing us, too, via the page layout.


SHE WAS TWELVE.

At first we experience what Tommy does, shock and horror at the size of Hulk bursting out of the comic, and then we take Tommy's place, staring into the eyes of the monster as he accuses us one more time, reminding us of the *real* horror of this comic, the death of the child. It threatens us with Hulk, and then reminds us of the real stakes, the reality of the scene, the horror of the issue. By doing it in this huge splash, it doesn't allow us anything else. Everything in the comic is taking up with this face staring us down, and reminding us that Tommy shot a 12 year old girl at the beginning of the issue.

It's another example of using large scales to narrow down the focus. If you fill up the space on both pages, you reduce the information able to be taken in by the reader. There isn't anything else to focus on here, either the image of Hulk or the words, "She was twelve." That is it. So it *has* to sit with you.

As mentioned previously, it does almost completely stall the momentum of the storytelling, because it's so drastically different than everything around it. On the surface that might seem like a Bad Thing, interrupting the flow of the comic's story, but intended effect can be a hugely powerful thing, and it gives this issue an amazingly resonant moment because these pages stand out amongst everything else. Sometimes you just need your audience to recognise something, to face up to an idea or to communicate something to them. In a sense, Hulk here is the most direct line through Ewing, Bennett and co., channelling a singular pure moment of connectedness to the reader. See this, it says. Understand this.

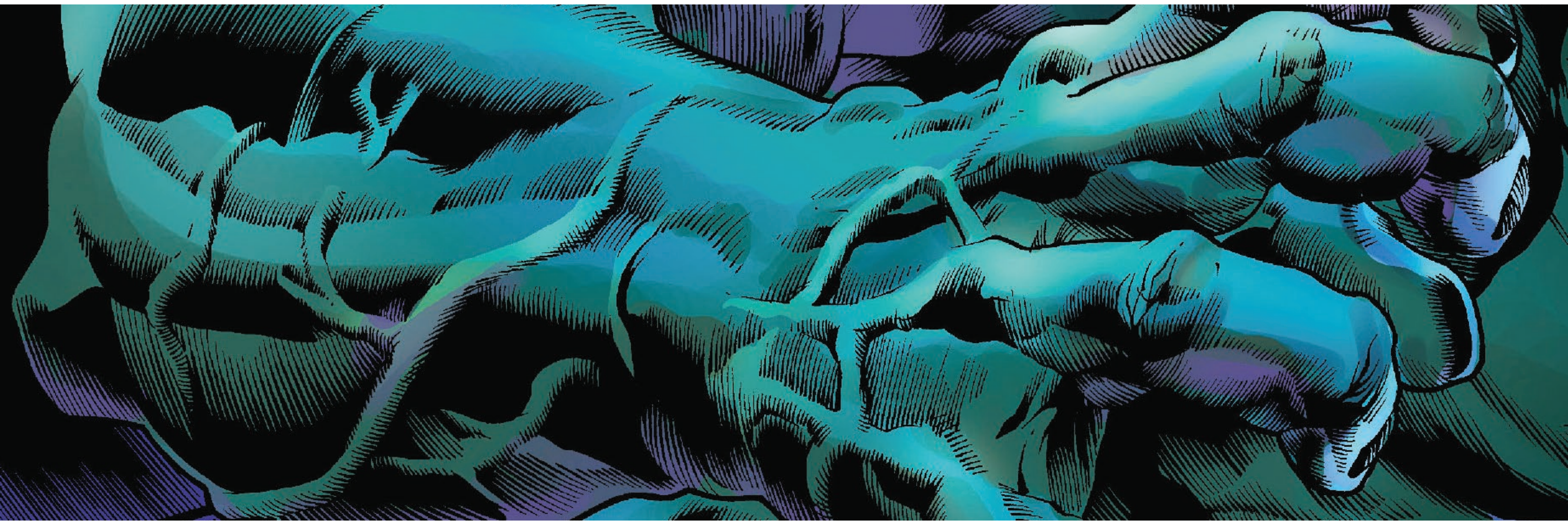
And yet, it all makes perfect sense within the context of a Hulk horror comic, because the language and usage is still deeply rooted in horror imagery and building fear. While the narrative might take an abrupt pacing change, the style and approach of the pages fit the book perfectly. It is both different and a perfect continuation. Like the idea of the close-up and the wide angle in the same image, it's an odd contradiction, and yet it's there, working, right on the page.

It's a really great argument for the power of a double-splash (or a double-double-splash in this case) in monthly comics. You might lose a not insignificant part of your page count for the moment, but when done well and within the right context, it gives you something only it can give. The single honing in on a concept, idea or theme, while equally giving broad strokes in an image, potentially interrupt a delicate pacing to drop a huge, memorable image and moment on an unsuspecting reader.

Shock and awe, bold and beautiful, and in this case terrifying and raw.

It ended up being a defining element in making the first issue of *Immortal Hulk* work just as well as it did for me, and that moment of Hulk looking into your soul will be rattling around in my head for quite some time.

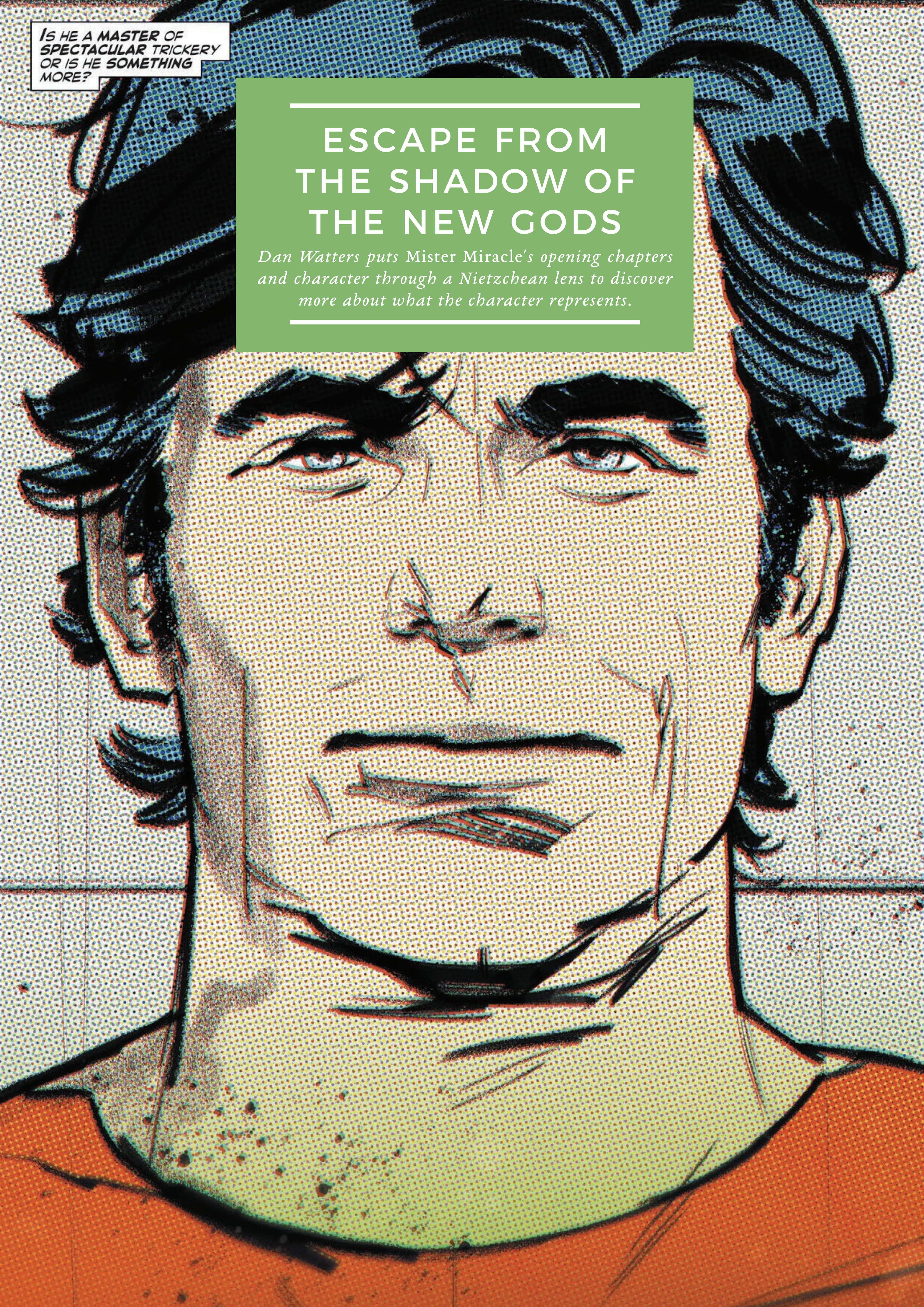
Here's to the double-splash.

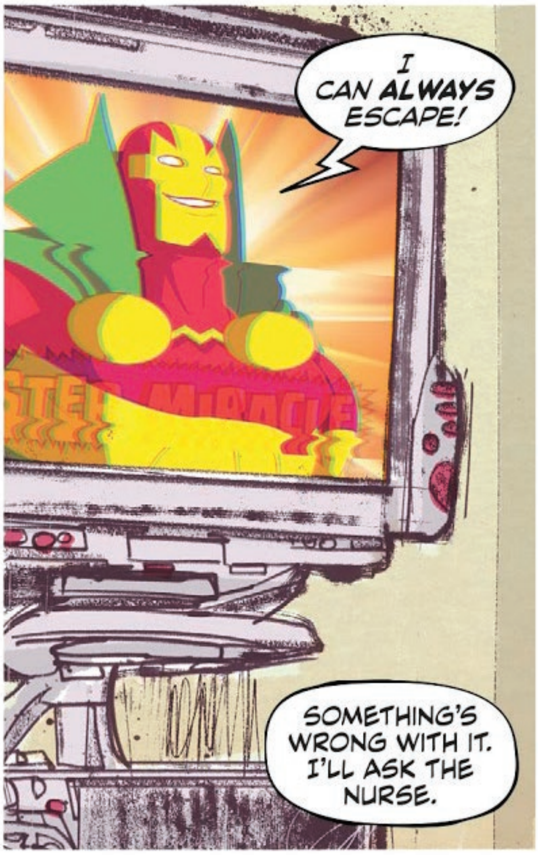


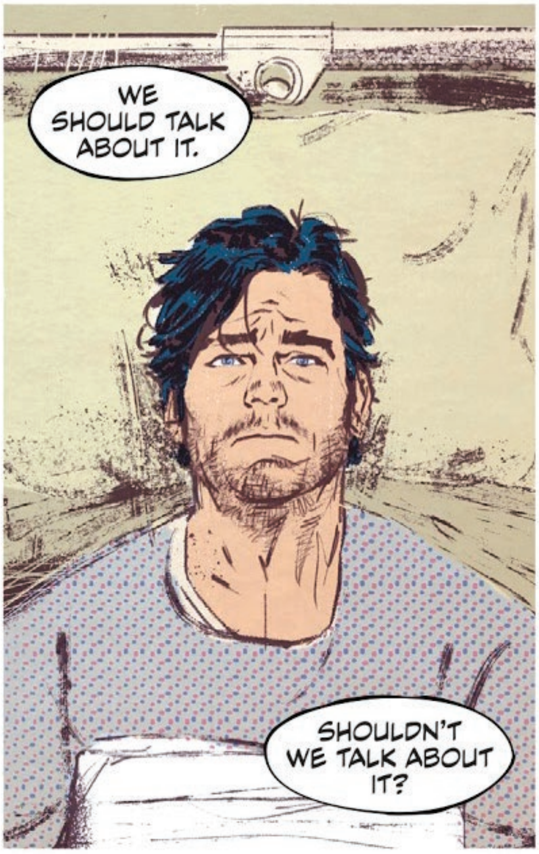
This article was originally featured in our Immortal Hulk *issue, #15. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO15*

ESCAPE FROM THE SHADOW OF THE NEW GODS

Dan Watters puts Mister Miracle*'s opening chapters and character through a Nietzchean lens to discover more about what the character represents.*


Is he a master of spectacular trickery or is he something more?


I CAN ALWAYS ESCAPE!
MISTER MIRACLE
SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH IT. I'LL ASK THE NURSE.


WE SHOULD TALK ABOUT IT.
SHOULDN'T WE TALK ABOUT IT?

BY DAN WATTERS

"I can always escape!" cheerfully espouses the warm and fuzzy televised Mister Miracle on an early page of Tom King and Mitch Gerad's *Mister Miracle* #1. But in Grant Morrison and Pasqual Ferry's masterful miniseries that made up part of Morrison's *Seven Soldiers* run, Mister Miracle (with Shilo Norman in the role rather than Scott Free, but Mister Miracle nonetheless) stages a grand escape from both nihilism and death. For a figure whose entire shtick is centred around escape artistry, we may consider the corners of his limits pretty much explored, dust off our hands and go home. What else does he have to escape from?

Plenty, I'm about to posit, and suggest that we turn to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche to ascertain exactly what "escape" in the context of *Mister Miracle* might mean. It may however be worth frontloading this with the disclaimer that the intention here is not to claim outright that Mister Miracle, or the New Gods as a whole, are specifically Nietzschean concepts by their nature. This is a single lens through which to view characters who are designed to be archetypal, and therefore invite lenses. This a single avenue of exploration that, just like King and Gerad's issue #1, starts with an ending[1].

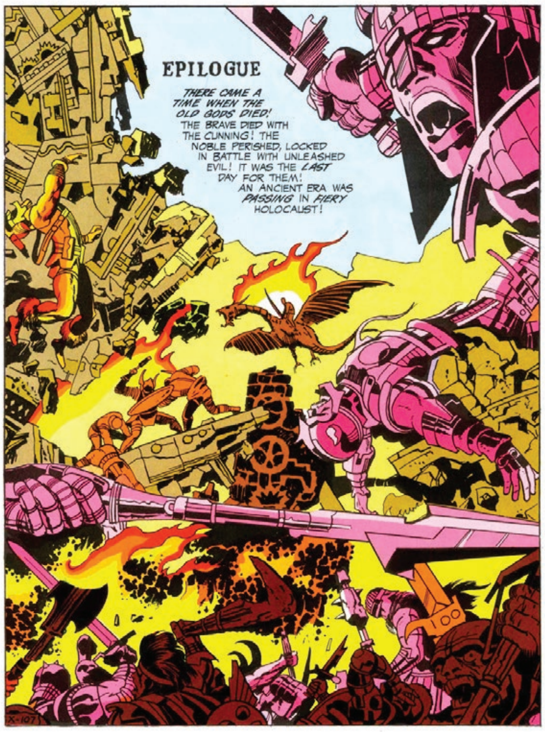
Jack Kirby's *The New Gods* #1, released February 1971, begins with an epilogue:

> "There was a time when the old gods died! The brave died with the cunning! The noble perished, locked in battle with the unleashed evil! It was the last day for them! An ancient era was passing in fiery holocaust!"

Eighty-nine years beforehand, Nietzsche wrote, in *The Gay Science,* of a madman who tore through a marketplace in the early hours of the morning, crying that:

> "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us?"

In both cases, the 'who' and 'how' of the deicide is irrelevant. Nietzsche's "God" is certainly the Christian God, but encompasses a larger cultural shift away from the moral binaries rooted in religious thought. Kirby's Old Gods do seem to be the old pantheons worshipped in the myths of antiquity, but this remains pretty much unimportant to the Fourth World stories; such characters are rarely (if ever) named, and exist primarily through their absence. Both Nietzsche and Kirby are concerned not with the act of death, but by what follows: for Nietzsche, the "shadow of God". For Kirby, the New Gods.


EPILOGUE
THERE CAME A TIME WHEN THE OLD GODS DIED! THE BRAVE DIED WITH THE CUNNING! THE NOBLE PERISHED, LOCKED IN BATTLE WITH UNLEASHED EVIL! IT WAS THE LAST DAY FOR THEM! AN ANCIENT ERA WAS PASSING IN FIERY HOLOCAUST!

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[1] *And, we can quite safely presume, a distressing volume of spilled blood.*

[2] *I may well be egregiously oversimplifying here, but in my defence, it did take Nietzsche passages in a couple of books over a number of years to define the concept properly.*

The shadow of God[2] is our inability to move on from the hold that religious systems have had on Western cultural (particularly moral) frameworks, despite that same culture undergoing prominent shifts away from true belief in the religion. For Nietzsche, the rejection of such antiquated systems should be a grand freedom from their shackles, an opportunity to build our new morality from philosophy and science. Yet, he ascertains that we will not be truly unshackle ourselves until we are able to fully accept the death of God, and erase its impacts; easier said than done, since he sees God's ethereal fingers deep in everything from linguistics to science; he believes that even the Enlightenment and its resultant secularism remain rooted in religious values.

With all that said[3], the New Gods are far from a fitting parallel to the Shadow of God. Indeed, the war between New Genesis and Apokolips is about as classicist a conflict as we could ever hope to find; a distinct and archetypal battle between good and evil. New Genesis is quite literally Edenic, all fields and rivers and people being very pleasant to one another. Apokolips is a planet technologically advanced far beyond Earth but nonetheless seems to dedicate the use of this technology almost exclusively to make its own inhabitants suffer - for seemingly little reason beyond that being how Darkseid and his cronies get their rocks off. We can therefore read the black and white divide of New-Genesis-good-Apokolips-bad as a reassertion of the kind of absolute values that Nietzsche claimed died with God. A clean-slate for mythology, perhaps, allowing Kirby to build his own from the ground up- but one that is as exaggeratedly operatic as any religion could hope to be.

It is interesting, even if not intentionally significant[4], that Kirby chooses the name Urgrund for the planet that was destroyed, splitting in two to create the homes of the New Gods. Literally meaning 'original ground', the term has been used in continental philosophy by figures such as Schelling to refer to the Absolute; the 'pure reality' that we, being forced to interact with this reality using imperfect human senses, don't have access to. This is a concept that Nietzsche would cover in depth after Schelling, particularly in his formation of and writing on perspectivism. When considering the extreme opposed values of New Genesis and Apokolips, Kirby's Urgrund could be seen as the ground, not so much 'middle' as 'all-encompassing' that the inhabitants of both Fourth World planets are never going to be able to reach by adhering to each of their own strict dogmas, as each only has access to half the understanding (as they literally only have access to half of the planet Urgrund respectively.) We may consider another term for this Absolute Reality: absolute truth. I doubt that the intertext of this naming was a conscious decision by Kirby - it seems more likely to my mind that he was simply reaching for something suitably Germanic for a world we may imagine parallels the Asgard of his own Thor run - but it does create for a fascinating synergous act.

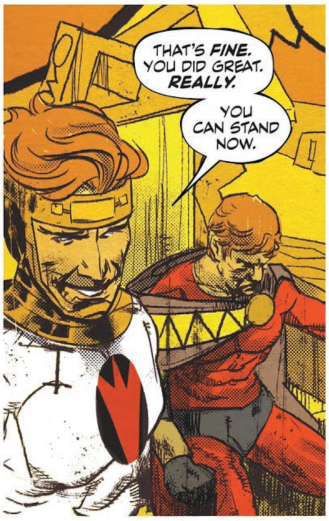
Nietzsche considers the role of art in society as one of reaching towards these absolute truths, a noble aspiring towards a perfection unattainable both for the art and our perception, the tools with which we are interacting with the art- and this perfection could certainly be seen as once again an element of Schelling's Urgrund; thus, a reading becomes available in which the entire Fourth World saga is a grand attempt to reach towards an unattainable pure reality through the Kantian sublimity of tales told on such grand scale with these archetypal figures[5]. The fundamentally and intrinsically imperceptible Urgrund must be broken down into the perceivable New Genesis and Apokolips in order that we may broach it, and then attempt to coalesce the two.

[3] *And somewhat inconveniently for our current thesis...*

[4] *Though as Roland Barthes declared the Author to be dead in much the same manner as Nietzsche declared God, I feel us well within our rights and thematic boundaries to plough lemminglike onwards here.*

[5] *Much as Nietzsche positioned the grand, similarly archetype-laden works of Wagner, at least before he underwent a somewhat messy emancipation from the master composer, and instead turned to writing rather sassy (yet beautifully eloquent) digs at him whenever given half an opportunity to do so.*

Into the dogmatic duality of the warring planets risen from the ashes of Urgrund[6], enters Mister Miracle. Escapologist extraordinaire, born of New Genesis and raised upon Apokolips. The son of both worlds, distruster of both. As Big Barda tells him in issue 1: "you're the son of Highfather, the son of God, heir to his throne, raised by his greatest enemy. You may be the only one who can save us." King and Gerad's version of the character is introduced as a reluctant champion for New Genesis, at odds with his adopted brother Orion[7] who has taken the throne after the off-panel death of Highfather (another notable death of God, as Barda literally called Highfather in the above quote). "Everything's wrong," Scott tells Barda before they leave to join the war against Apokolips, and his battle cry at the beginning of issue 2, "for New Genesis!" rings increasingly hollow as he grows exhausted.


THAT'S FINE. YOU DID GREAT. REALLY.
YOU CAN STAND NOW.

By the end of this issue we find a tangle of betrayals and double crosses. "New Genesis" becomes abstract; is it served in loyalty to Orion and his troops, or to Highfather? Would trusting Granny Goodness be a betrayal of its values, or would blindly following the increasingly brutish Orion? Mister Miracle's connection to both New Genesis and Apokolips, his personal relationships with both Granny Goodness and Orion is the reason that he ends up caught in this tangle, and the reason that he is the only one who seems to see the flaws in each system. For Scott Free, it seems that the New Gods, as entities standing for values of 'goodness' are already dead. The presentation of Lightray and Orion in the throne room reaffirms this, as they come across pompous, foolish and cruel. They have reinstated old laws and old dogmas, with seemingly little thought as to their actual context or repercussion. The culture is eclipsed in the shadow of God and has become one that for Scott (as it would be for Nietzsche) is far from desirable or- we get the sense- even tolerable. Another place from which Mister Miracle desires escape. But when the duality of New Genesis/Apokolips seems all-encompassing (regularly encroaching on his life on Earth enough that Barda barely bothers to wake when Orion boom tubes into their living room), we once again find the problem of: where is there to escape to?

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[6] *And at very long last into an essay pertaining to be about him.*

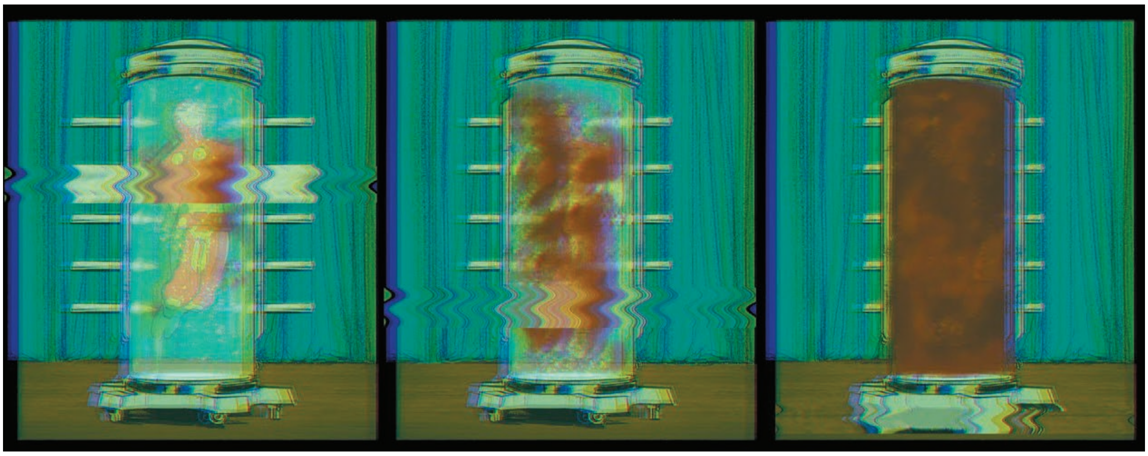
[7] *Orion is another son of both worlds, but perhaps connects with each on a more emotional level than Scott. In Nietzschean terms he creates an Apollonian foil to Scott's Dionysian. But alas, wordcounts (perhaps mercifully) mean we'll have to leave off at a loose, wriggling, bloody stump of an end here; we may at least extend our metaphor, thematically at least, by mentioning that as Scott's reversed doppelganger (born of Apokolips, raised on New Genesis) Orion becomes almost literally a shadow of a god, and Scott his.*

The problem that the concept of "escape" quickly runs up against is the necessity of there being a "freedom" to escape to; another concept that quickly reduces to an extremely relativist abstract on examination- one that Nietzsche dedicated much of his writings to, and that he seems to particularly have a bone to pick with, stating in *Beyond Good and Evil*[8]:

> "The desire for "freedom of will" in the superlative, metaphysical sense... the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society therefrom, involves nothing less than to be precisely this causa sui, and, with... daring, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness."

Here, freedom requires a vacuum that life does not provide- an escape from context and intertext and interrelationship, and all of the networked elements that have brought about the situation from which escape is required in the first place.

And this may explain something about Mister Miracle. The figure of the master escapologist, the only one to have escaped from the horrors of Apokolips, from death and from nihilism, has not been able to teach us to follow his lead[9], in the same manner that watching a real-life escapologist escape from a straight-jacket underwater while juggling chainsaws with their feet and whistling the Macarena would have. Though their feats are unattainable for us, in the case of both, we still want to watch. We still require/desire stories around the character, and want to see him perform escape after escape after escape; for each escape recontextualizes the positioning of his existence, and the world around him. Even should he emerge from the Nietzschean shadow of God (and the New Gods) altogether, it would be into a new existential framework that would have its own pitfalls, agonies and brutalities that would require escape from. Escape becomes an eternal process, rather than a singular act.



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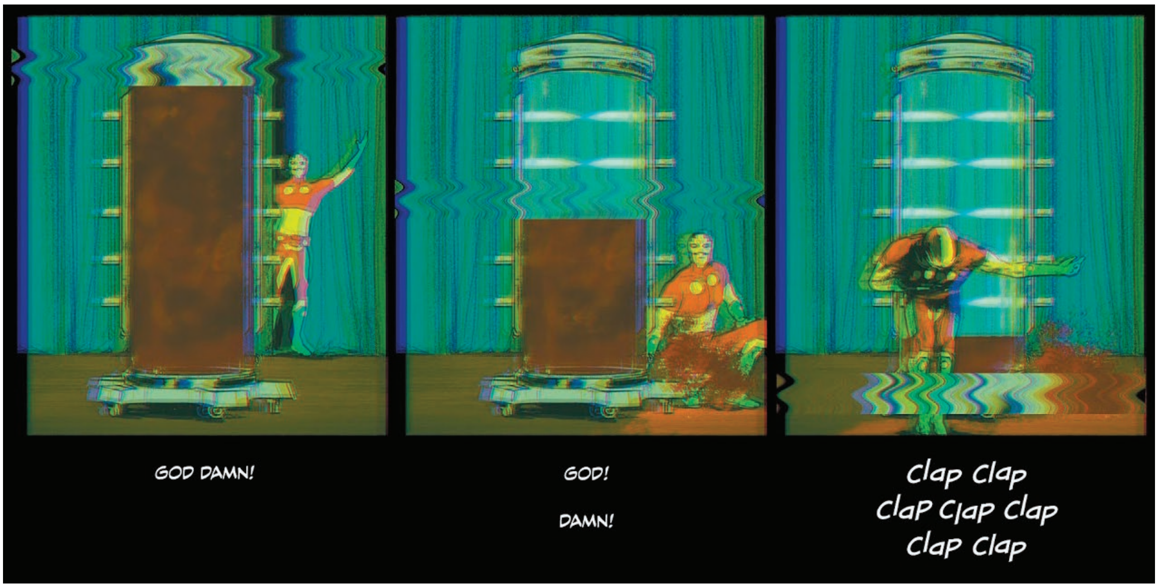
[8] *In a passage that we can truly imagine emerging from the cracked grey lips of Darkseid himself.*
[9] *Though few of us require a lead in escaping from Apokolips, this may be more of a meta-geographic consideration than any fault at Mister Miracle's end.*

And thus[10], in the context of *Mister Miracle*, 'escape' describes will to power. The perpetual desire of the organism to move from its current position to a higher one - to lift oneself from the present mire, to a better place. For Nietzsche, this is a desire, or rather an imperative, that never relents throughout a life; indeed, more than that, it defines the act of living itself, since every act performed by a living entity, when stripped back, becomes one of aspiration. As such Mister Miracle, for all his murky apokolyptic roots, and despite the consistent pain that he is confronted with (of which we already find plenty in King/Gerads' run), becomes avatar of the act of living; a superhero not defined by battle or power or domination, but merely by release from pain, and eruption into joy.

As the world from which he desires escape becomes ever more disorientating and self-contradictory (as it is increasingly doing so for Scott, as even his wife's eye color flickers back and forth), we wait with baited breath to discover whether he can find new means of escape, of release from pain, of redefining his own self and his own relationships to the world around him. Perhaps if Mister Miracle can, we can do the same.


GOD DAMN!
GOD!
DAMN!
Clap Clap
Clap Clap Clap
Clap Clap

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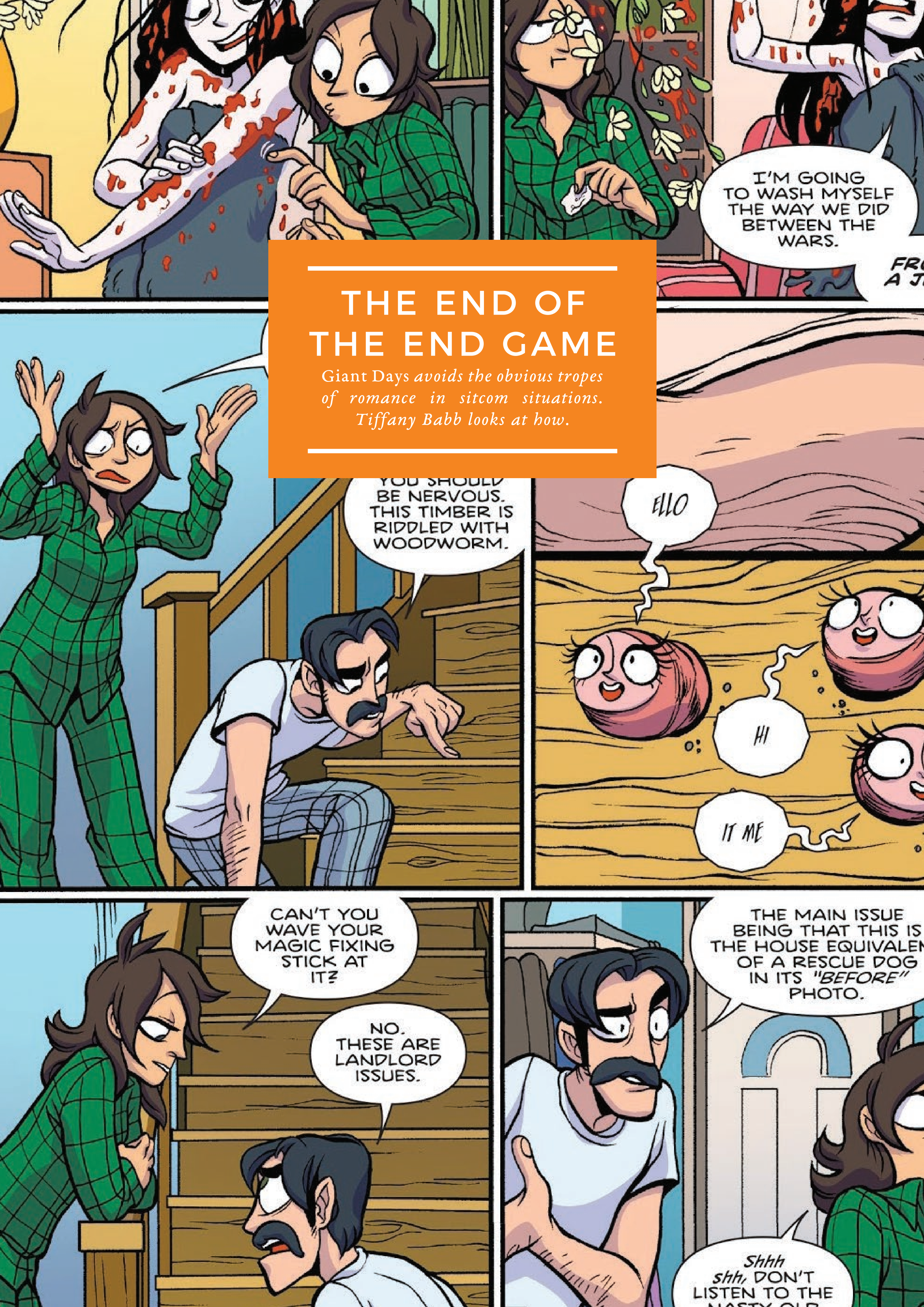
[10] *And to at last complete our bingo card of Nietzschean clichés.*

This article was originally featured in our Mister Miracle *issue, #4. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO4*

THE END OF THE END GAME

Giant Days avoids the obvious tropes of romance in sitcom situations. Tiffany Babb looks at how.

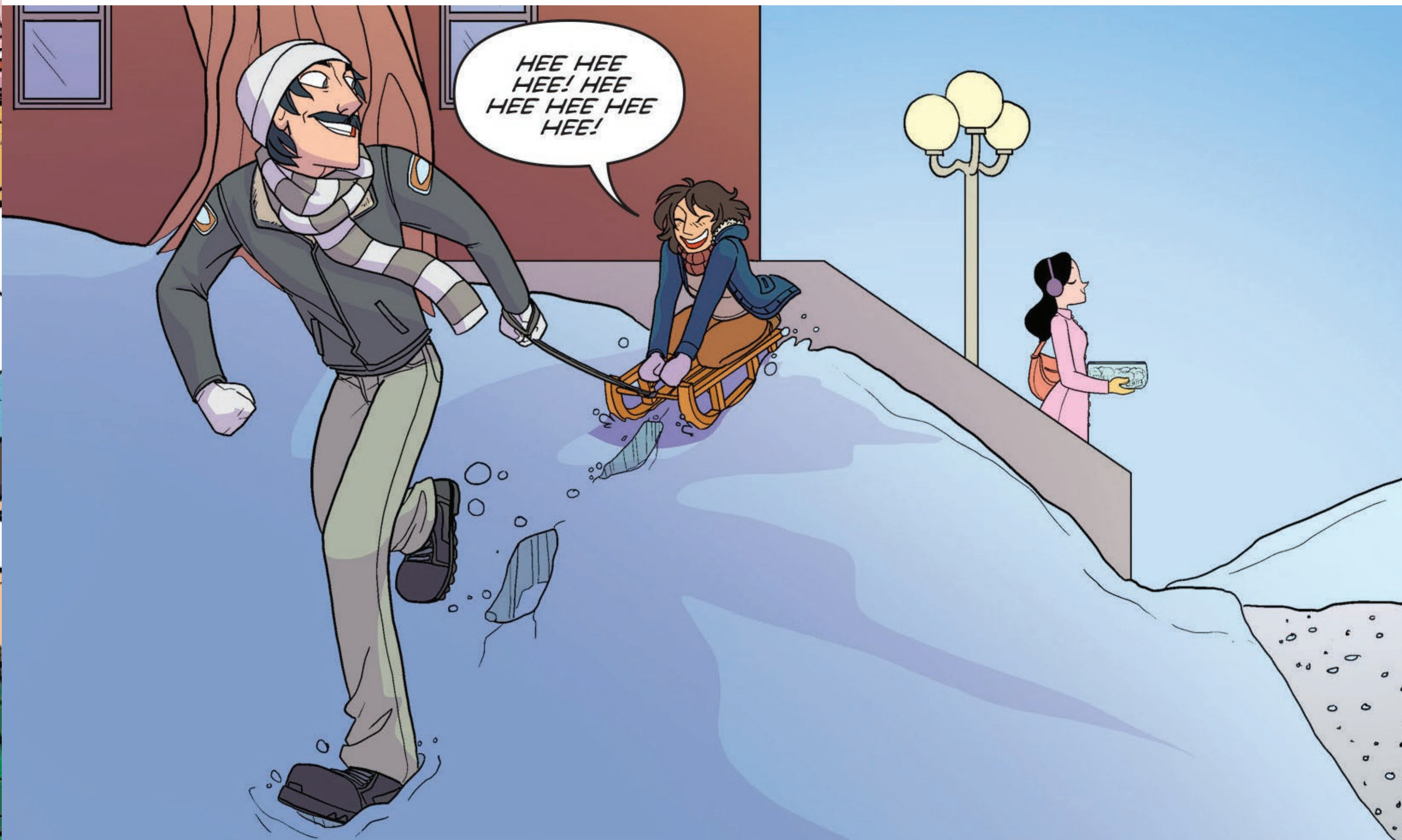

I'M GOING TO WASH MYSELF THE WAY WE DID BETWEEN THE WARS.
YOU SHOULD BE NERVOUS. THIS TIMBER IS RIDDLED WITH WOODWORM.
ELLO
HI
IT ME
CAN'T YOU WAVE YOUR MAGIC FIXING STICK AT IT?
NO. THESE ARE LANDLORD ISSUES.
THE MAIN ISSUE BEING THAT THIS IS THE HOUSE EQUIVALEN OF A RESCUE DOG IN ITS "BEFORE" PHOTO.
Shhh shh, DON'T LISTEN TO THE

BY TIFFANY BABB

Giant Days is a gem.

It's a great story filled with awesome art and relatable characters that also treads the thin line between realism and farce (much like one's time at university), but more specifically to this article, *Giant Days* happens to be one of those rare things that portrays romantic relationships realistically.

To someone just coming into this tirade I often give, it can seem like I hate romantic subplots and happy endings. And I don't, really. I just think that romantic storylines are so often the scourge of good storytelling. How many movies, comics, novels are there in which a romantic subplot is wedged at the detriment of the rest of the story? How many (usually heterosexual) protagonists end up together after a movie full of lackluster chemistry and constant displays of incompatibility?


HEE HEE HEE! HEE HEE HEE HEE HEE!

On the other side of the spectrum is the romantic movie that treats getting into a relationship as the be all end all. The kind of story that promises a perfect fit, the idea of a soul mate, or even of fate dictating how a relationship should be.

It's hard not to love that kind of storytelling in something like *The Princess Bride,* but when it starts to be shoehorned into any and every story with any sort of romance, it begins to be a bit tiring.

This effect is only heightened when it comes to a long-term series. While some long format stories have successfully pulled of a "will they won't they" subplot, the story more often just ends up awful because the characters must be pulled apart by Reasons and then must have other Fate/Destiny reasons to want to stay together.

This has created the phenomenon of the "End Game," which is often something that I find somewhat toxic. Currently, there's a lot of talk about returning to the romantic comedies of the '80s with a more critical eye regarding how male romantic protagonists treat women, and I think that is an important step towards questioning the tropes that have dominated how narrative media has portrayed the ideal relationship.

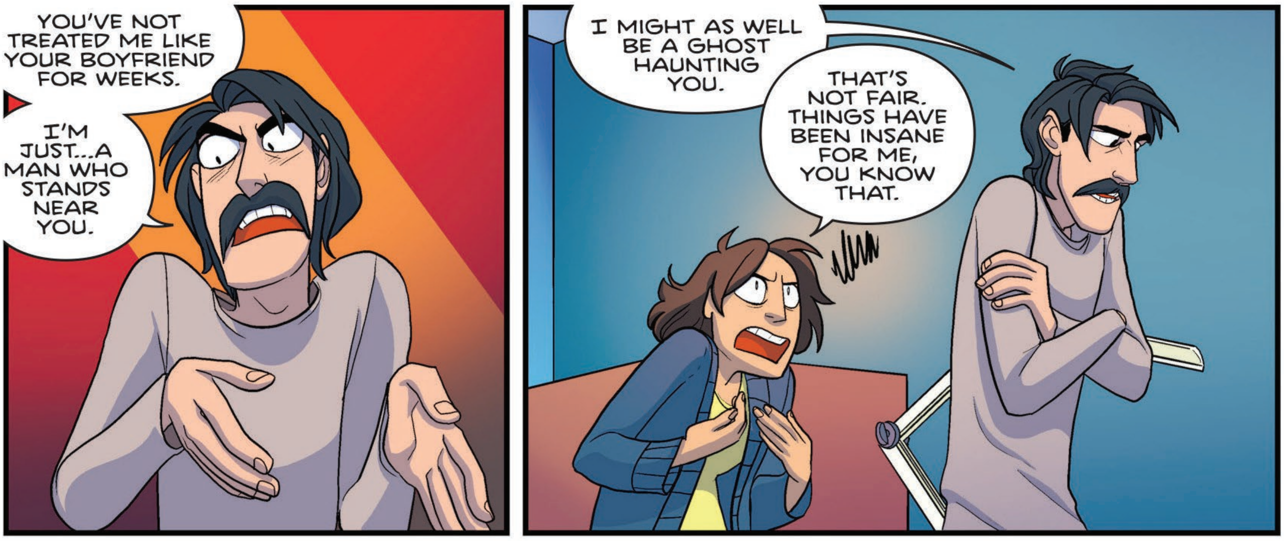
The romantic comedy nearly always ends with two leads getting together. While there is nothing wrong with that type of ending, the toxic part of the issue becomes more obvious when the actual happenings that take place on the way to the forming of the relationship are wiped away in the dramatic Getting Together moment. And often, this "getting together" plot of the romantic comedy is woven into other genres of stories to add a "human element."

Of course, drama is essential for storytelling, and one easy path to drama is having main characters hurt each other. However, a story ending with a band-aid over a bullet wound (or a kiss after horrendous behavior) sets up a poor precedent for what is acceptable in relationships and what should be pushed aside in the service of the "perfect soulmate."

That's the cool thing about *Giant Days.* The relationships in *Giant Days* feel organic. There's no pressure about who will end up together. Of course, there are relationships the readers want to see happen, but there is no blatantly artificial story-pressure focusing solely on that. Part of this is because characters remain just as interesting when they are within relationships as they are when they are out of relationships. The action of the story is not driven only by romantic drama.

And even when the plot is driven by romantic drama, relationships aren't treated as a binary state. It's not a happily ever after. Once a relationship begins, the work isn't done. A relationship takes time, effort, a willingness to understand, and effort to find the best solution forward. *Giant Days* doesn't present that relationships are a fix for anything.

One great example of this is that McGraw breaks up with Susan while she is obsessively wrapped up in running a student body campaign. Susan seems to be under the impression that she can just take time off and come back to what it was without any change. McGraw, understandably, doesn't want to stick around until Susan feels she has time to be in a relationship again.

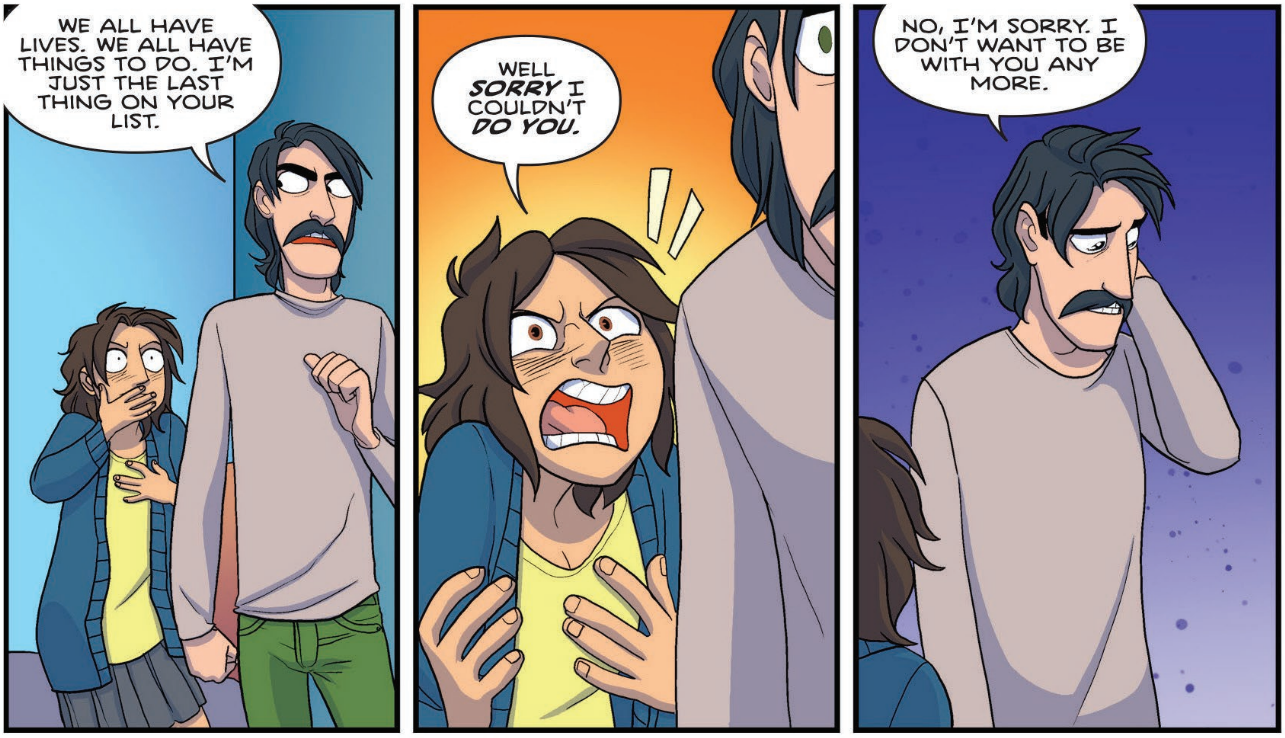

YOU'VE NOT TREATED ME LIKE YOUR BOYFRIEND FOR WEEKS.
I'M JUST...A MAN WHO STANDS NEAR YOU.
I MIGHT AS WELL BE A GHOST HAUNTING YOU.
THAT'S NOT FAIR. THINGS HAVE BEEN INSANE FOR ME, YOU KNOW THAT.

It's important to note here that the breakup isn't some sort of random dramatic action from McGraw. He isn't doing it to wake Susan up from her obsession; he has already tried that. He is moving on, because the relationship is no longer working for either of them.

From this experience, Susan learns that she needs to understand she can't put things on pause. She can't just close the door on the world temporarily because what she is doing is taking up all her time. In other words, relationships take work.

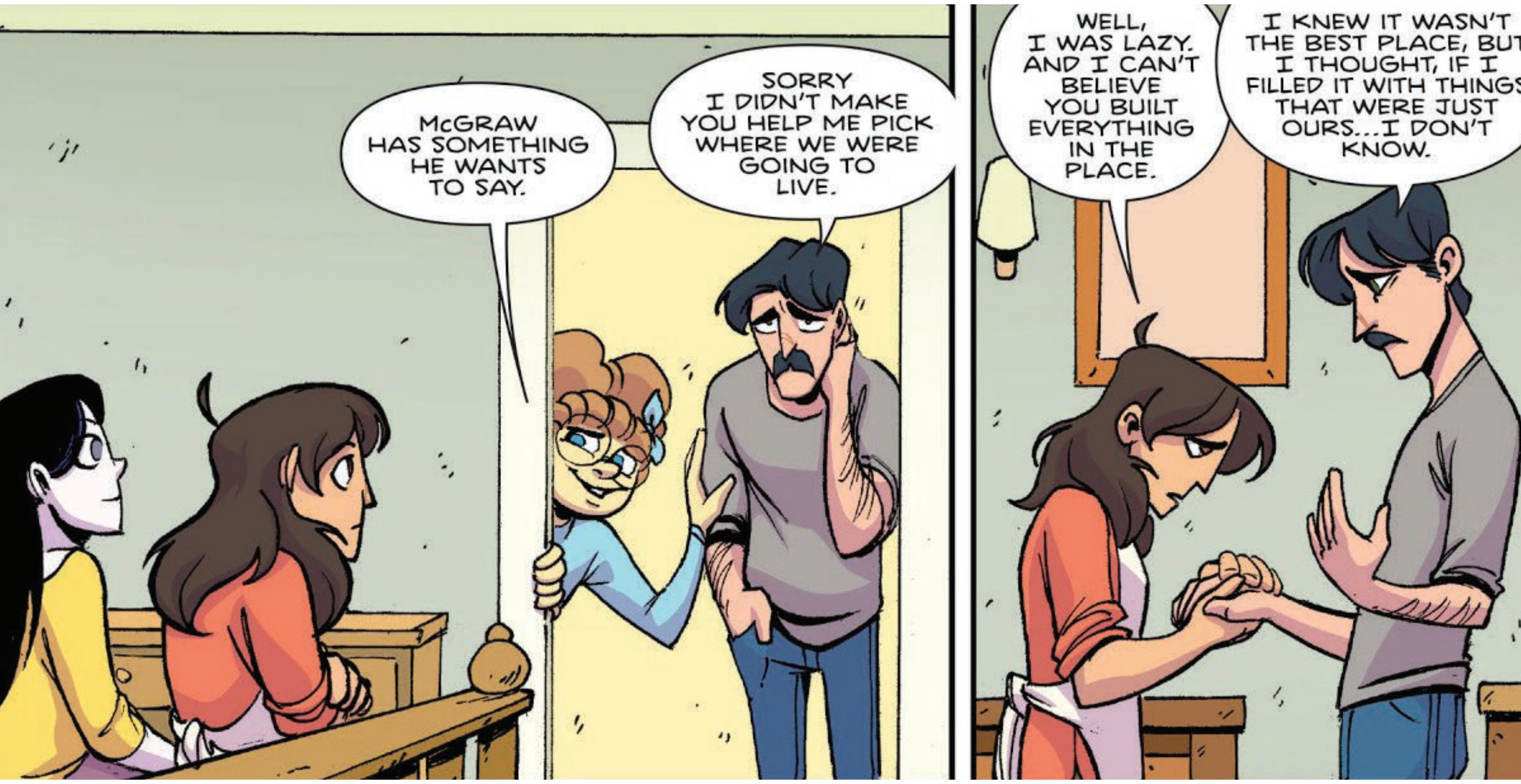
Way later, once they have become a couple again, we see another example of working things out in a relationship. This time, it's a little more successful. Susan and McGraw move into a new apartment and immediately get into a fight about the place that McGraw has rented.

The argument emphasizes the lack of communication they've had about renting their place, but it also shows where they are as people and what they expect from each other. It isn't until Esther points out to Susan that McGraw has built all the furniture in their apartment that Susan even notices the effort McGraw put into the apartment.


WE ALL HAVE LIVES. WE ALL HAVE THINGS TO DO. I'M JUST THE LAST THING ON YOUR LIST.
WELL *SORRY* I COULDN'T *DO YOU.*
NO, I'M SORRY. I DON'T WANT TO BE WITH YOU ANY MORE.

As a reader, it's much easier to catch on. But our emotions aren't quite as tied to the situation as Susan's and McGraw's are. For Susan, McGraw choosing this apartment building after she has pointed out multiple times that she hates it, signifies either him not listening to what she says or him actively doing something she doesn't want him to do. He is not thinking about what she needs.

From McGraw's point of view, he had to do his apartment search on his own, which was obviously a lot of work, and there weren't many options left anyway. He tried to do his best to make the place their own by redecorating it and building the furniture, and Susan not recognizing his work and expecting the worst out of him is uncalled for.


McGRAW HAS SOMETHING HE WANTS TO SAY.
SORRY I DIDN'T MAKE YOU HELP ME PICK WHERE WE WERE GOING TO LIVE.
WELL, I WAS LAZY. AND I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU BUILT EVERYTHING IN THE PLACE.
I KNEW IT WASN'T THE BEST PLACE, BU I THOUGHT, IF I FILLED IT WITH THING THAT WERE JUST OURS...I DON'T KNOW.

Luckily, Susan and McGraw have good friends in Daisy and Esther. This episode also works as a good example that relationships are sometimes better with the help of an outside perspective.

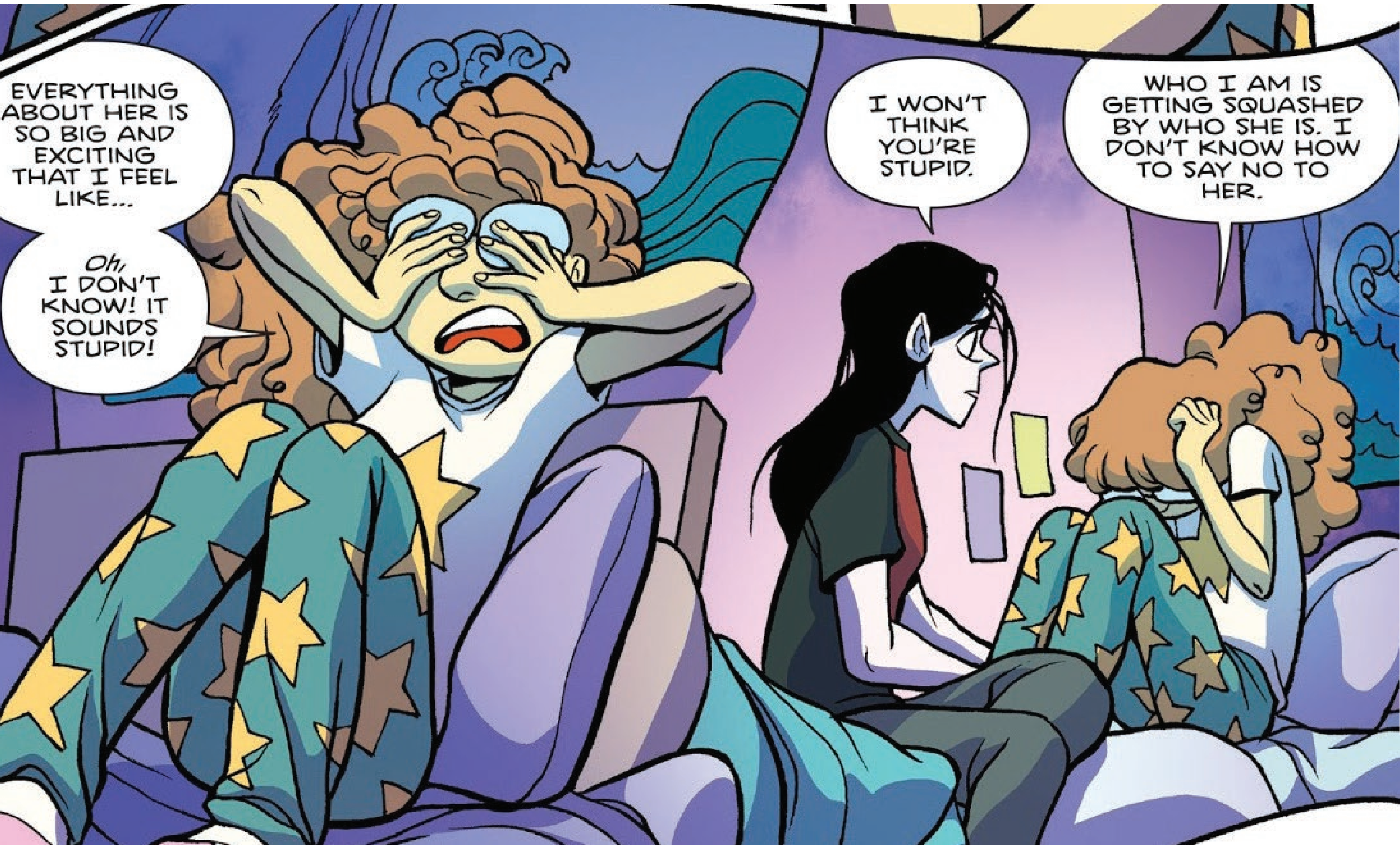
There is something delightfully complex about how John Allison treats this confrontation. First of all, it seems incredibly realistic. Confrontations like Susan and McGraw's happen all the time. It is how partners react to the confrontations that makes a good or a bad relationship. *Giant Days* finds drama in the every day.

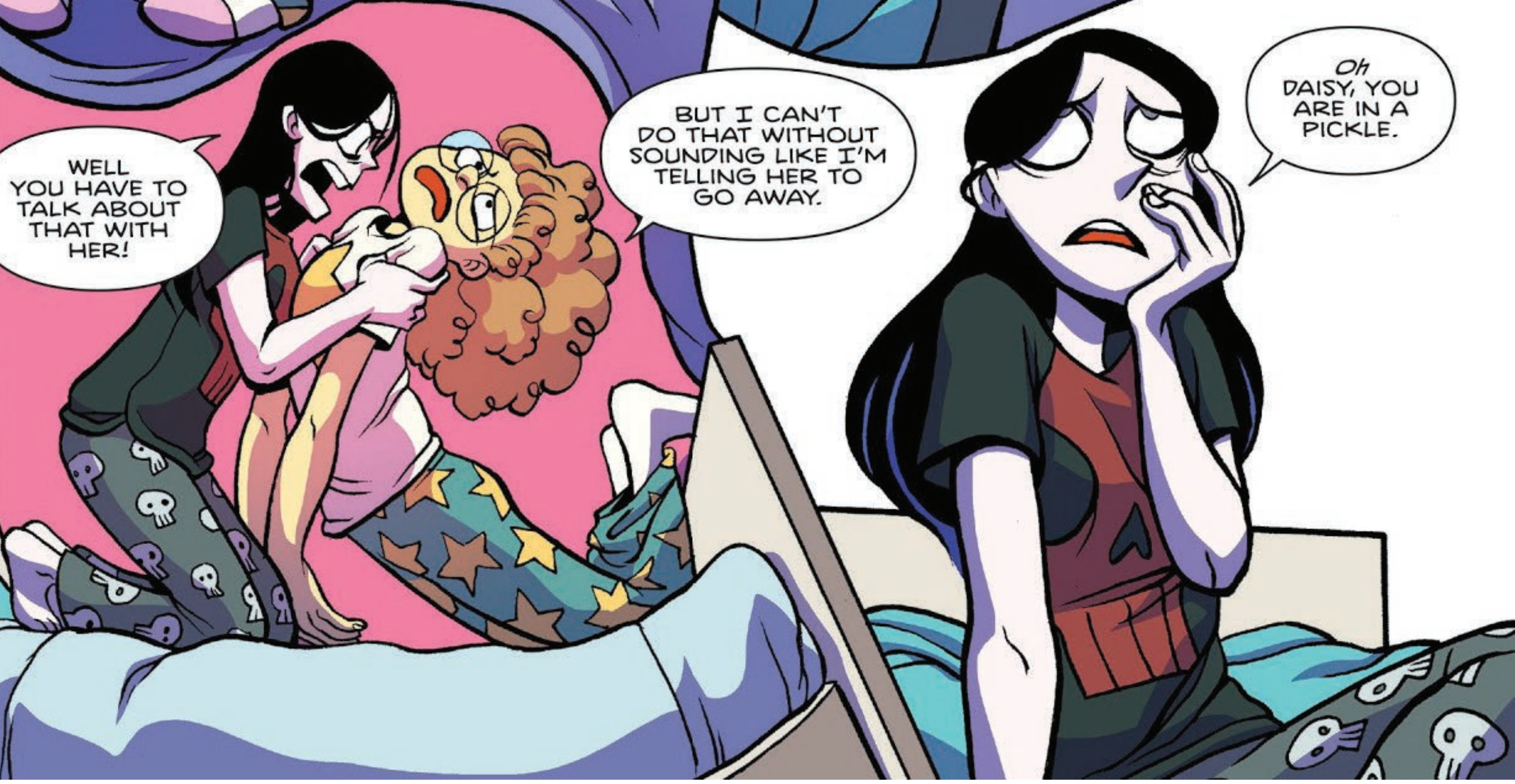
The series often steers away from relying on jealousy and possible cheating (although those instances do show up as well) for its source of relationship drama. The issues these uni students face are the problems that a lot of uni students face. While jealousy is totally a thing in these stories, it carefully avoids any implication that relationships are somehow reliant on the "goodness" or "deserving" of a person instead of people who have decided to commit to each other in a certain way.

For example, while Ed clearly in head over heels for Esther, there is no nudging of Esther by anyone to "give him a chance." Also, Ed is never inappropriate or weird about his feelings for Esther.

And after Susan and McGraw break up, and McGraw begins dating Emilia, there is never any talk about her not "deserving" McGraw. Susan might hate Emilia, but she goes out of her way to take action towards building bridges with her, even when it costs her pride.

Bad relationships exist in *Giant Days* as well. Ingrid and Daisy's "nightmare" of a relationship is a great example of a person feeling stuck in a relationship because it's their first, but it also shows Daisy recognizing the signs of a bad relationship and following her instincts.


EVERYTHING ABOUT HER IS SO BIG AND EXCITING THAT I FEEL LIKE...
Oh, I DON'T KNOW! IT SOUNDS STUPID!
I WON'T THINK YOU'RE STUPID.
WHO I AM IS GETTING SQUASHED BY WHO SHE IS. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO SAY NO TO HER.


WELL YOU HAVE TO TALK ABOUT THAT WITH HER!
BUT I CAN'T DO THAT WITHOUT SOUNDING LIKE I'M TELLING HER TO GO AWAY.
Oh DAISY, YOU ARE IN A PICKLE.

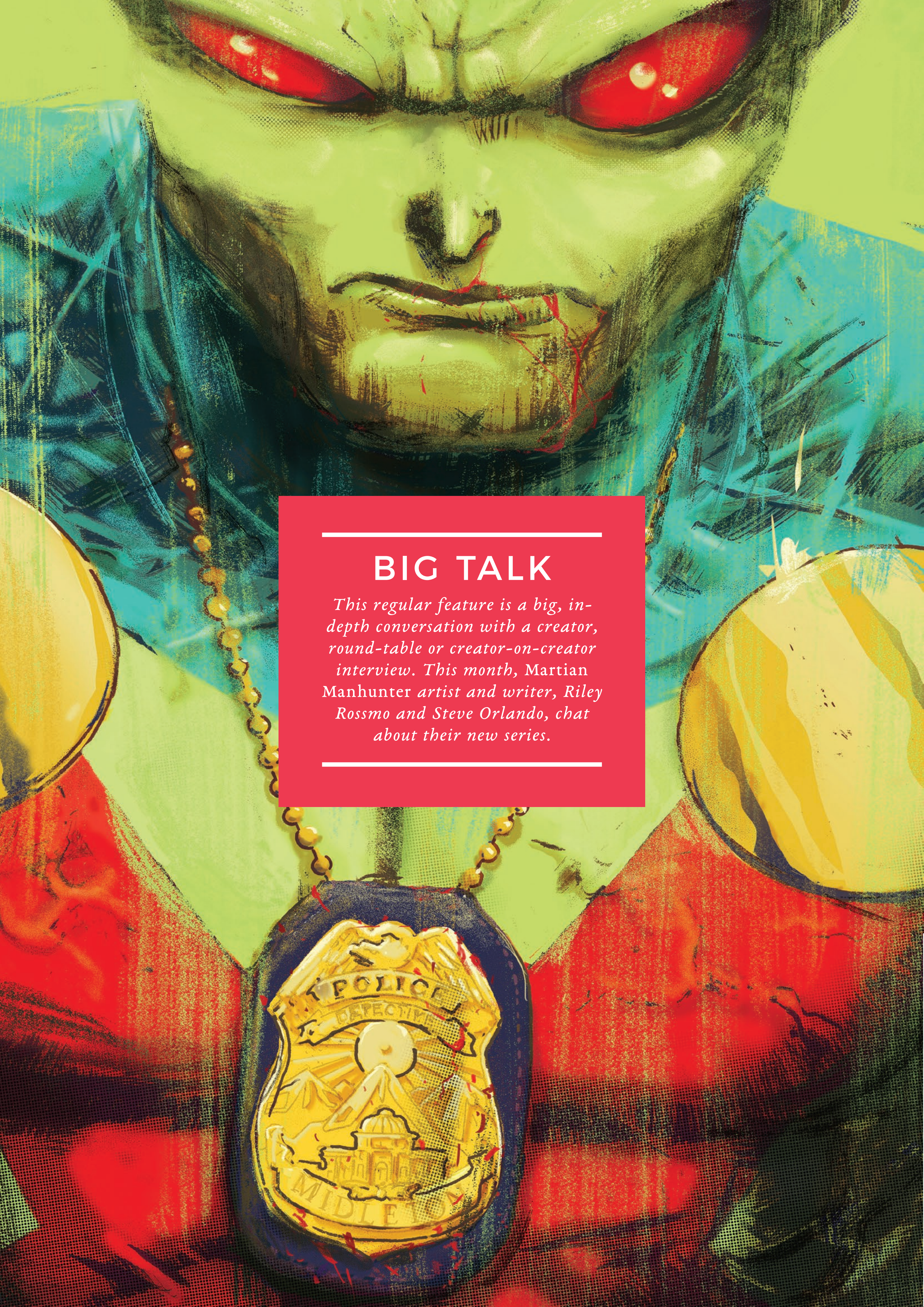
Astrid's calling Daisy's granny and outing Daisy is another example of something that in a less worthy narrative might be brushed away for the "bigger picture" of romance. But Daisy very clearly sets her boundaries. So even when Astrid tries to win her back, Daisy has not forgotten what Astrid did. This is another useful trait that *Giant Days* has - a commitment to permanence.

This is probably the most interesting aspect of how *Giant Days* treats its romantic relationships. Though the series often tells single issue stories, the characters change from the events they go through, even when the events are never mentioned again. Continuity lives on through the development of the characters.

This makes it easy for readers to be invested in these characters when we see that what happens to them matters. This also makes for a great story, where characters grow, make mistakes, and change. *Giant Days* reminds us that being a good partner doesn't come naturally, and that's okay too.

This article was originally featured in our Giant Days *issue, #16. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO16*

THE REGULARS


POLICE
DETECTIVE
MIDLETO

BIG TALK

This regular feature is a big, in-depth conversation with a creator, round-table or creator-on-creator interview. This month, Martian Manhunter *artist and writer, Riley Rossmo and Steve Orlando, chat about their new series.*

THE FREEDOM OF CREATIVITY:
STEVE ORLANDO x RILEY ROSSMO

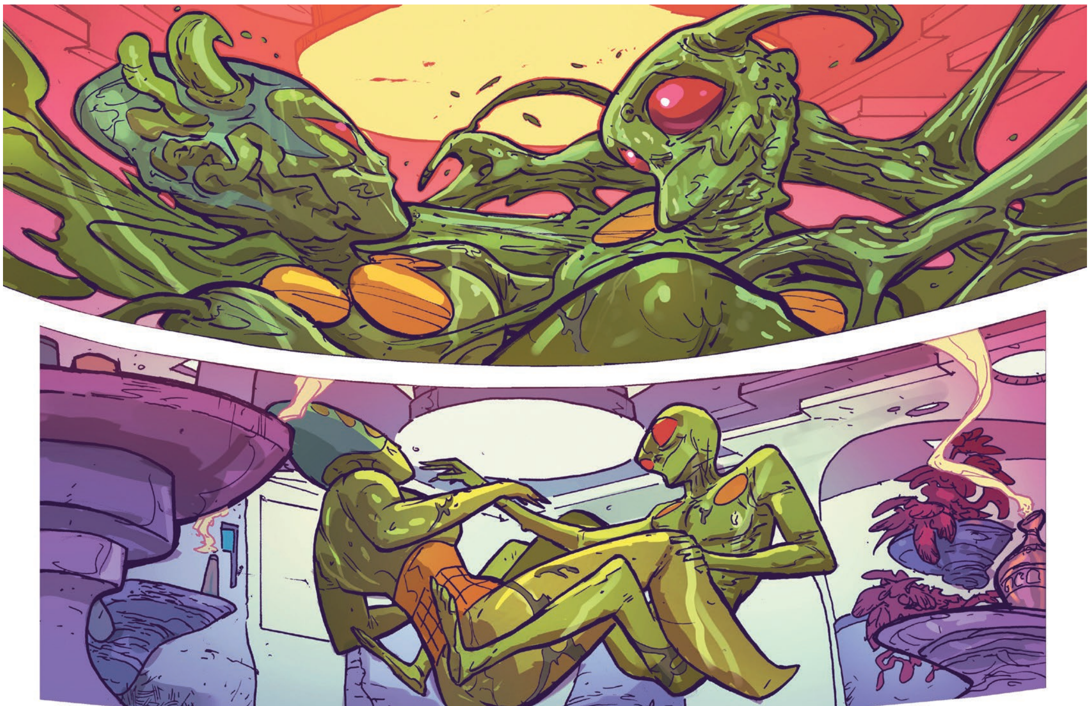
Steve Orlando: From the start, after we did *Night of the Monster Men* and *Batman/The Shadow: The Murder Geniuses,* I felt I had to sell you on the possibility of *Martian Manhunter* as the next book and the opportunities it offered. What was on your mind?

Riley Rossmo: I just never thought of *Martian Manhunter* before. *New Frontier* is Martian Manhunter to me, that and some of Grant Morrison's *JLA.* With DC stuff, I generally gravitate to more of the more occult characters. The stuff I collect is Bernie Wrightson's *Swamp Thing* and *Witching Hour*. So, a science fiction book was a scary proposition for me. But, he looks real cool, sooo...

Orlando: When we started talking about the character and Martian culture, even though we will work our way to the classic costume we're both thinking of, we realized that there wouldn't be one specific look to J'Onn J'Onzz. He has a lot of differed looks depending on his mood, and depending on what's going on in the story. When we started talking about how Mars works there was a lot of give and take between us. We talked about how telepathy would work, about how their physical culture would work, but a lot of that visual came from you, Riley.

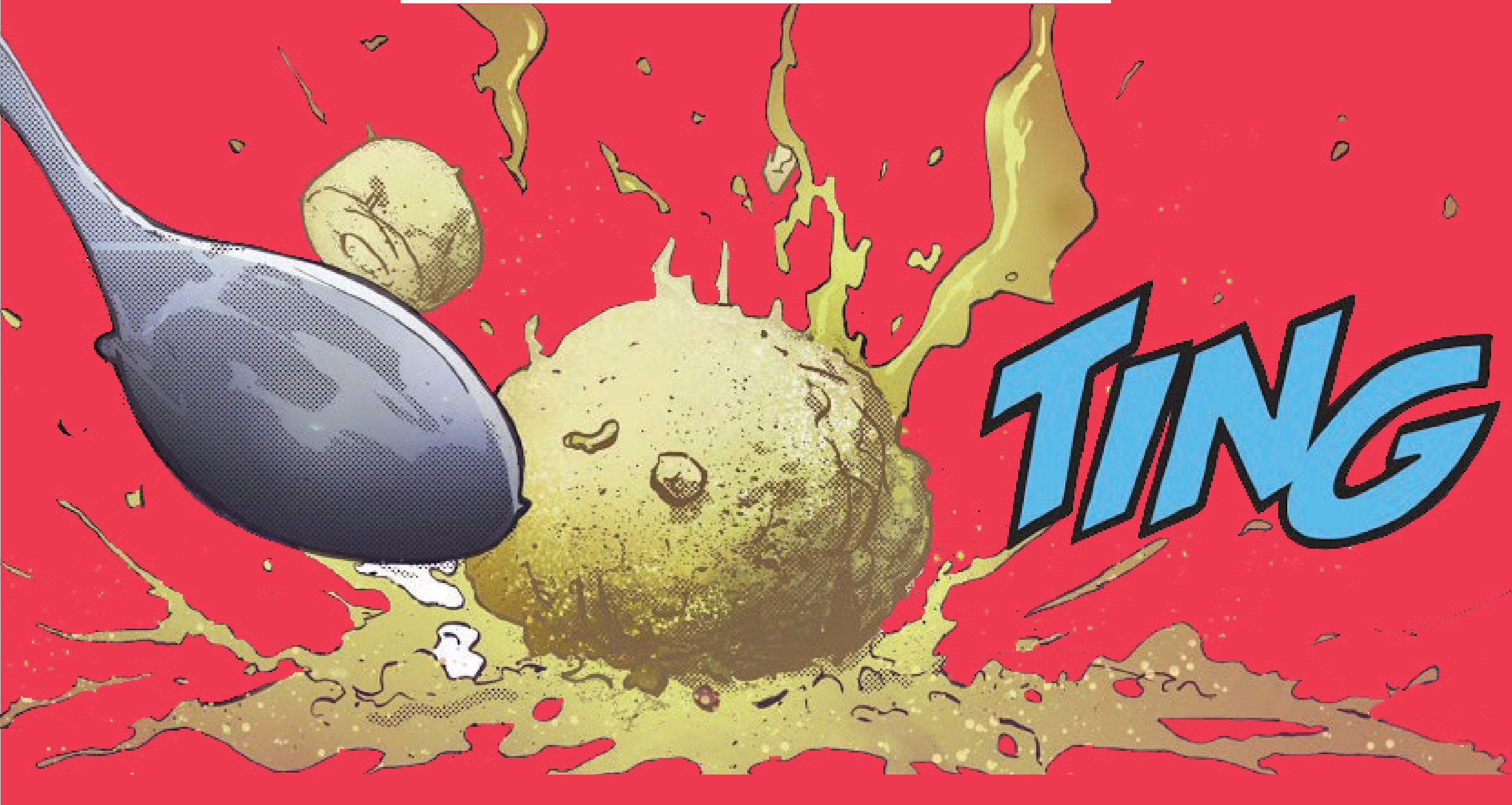
Rossmo: Once we started talking about it, that's where the background information and worldbuilding came in. Everyone talks about 'worldbuilding,' but that was the part that got me excited for the project. As we started talking about Yellow Martians, you told me about how they've been depicted historically and what they value culturally. That opened all kinds of doors for how to represent them. They value intellect, so I started making design choices to take away their physical bodies. They just live in these... sacks...and they focus on just intellectual pursuits. That's really the cool and interesting stuff to me. That's the hook. Just thinking about the world excites me.

Orlando: People toss around a term like worldbuilding a lot. In the case of *Martian Manhunter* we got to build a society in a way that actual societies evolve, which is very exciting. We talked about the culture first and our decisions about the culture led to your decisions about the design and the Martian looks. Because the way these characters think and what they value, just like in the real world, leads them to make the choices for how they enter the world. I think it's very organic. It wasn't just about 'does this look cool.' I think we put ourselves through the paces to build Mars the way a real society would grow organically, or naturally, or sociologically I should say.



On a practical standpoint, working with you is different than how I work with a lot of other artists. It's evolved over our different collaborations from *Night of the Monster Men* and *Batman/The Shadow* and lends itself to really interesting storytelling choices. As I listened to you and we went back and forth as collaborators, I basically reinvented my script format after hearing what would work best for you. And, in return, I think that a freedom of creativity comes across on your pages that's really evident. A lot of the choices you make and the things you focus on for each page are genuinely surprising to me.

You know, I bought the matzo ball soup hitting the ground page from *Batman/The Shadow* because I love the moments we find within a script that have surprising meaning, even if they're quiet or things a comic wouldn't normally focus on. I think that it happens because you have the freedom to focus (or not) on the things that interest you. When you get a script in this format (without panel breaks but with rough dialogue so that you know what the characters are saying and where they're coming from emotionally), all the action on the page is laid out in a paragraph so that you have the freedom to do layouts as you want. What happens when I turn that in? It's fascinating to see the moments you pick out and it's always a genuine surprise to me and it's something we should talk about.



Rossmo: Before we get to that, there's something I wanted to ask you about, Steve. When you're writing scripts for other people, do you see it? Do you structure it? Do you have a rough visual? Are you conceptualizing it visually in your mind? Say when you're writing the *Wonder Woman* script that ACO drew vs. *Batman/The Shadow* that I drew, what do you see? Or is it just a surprise?

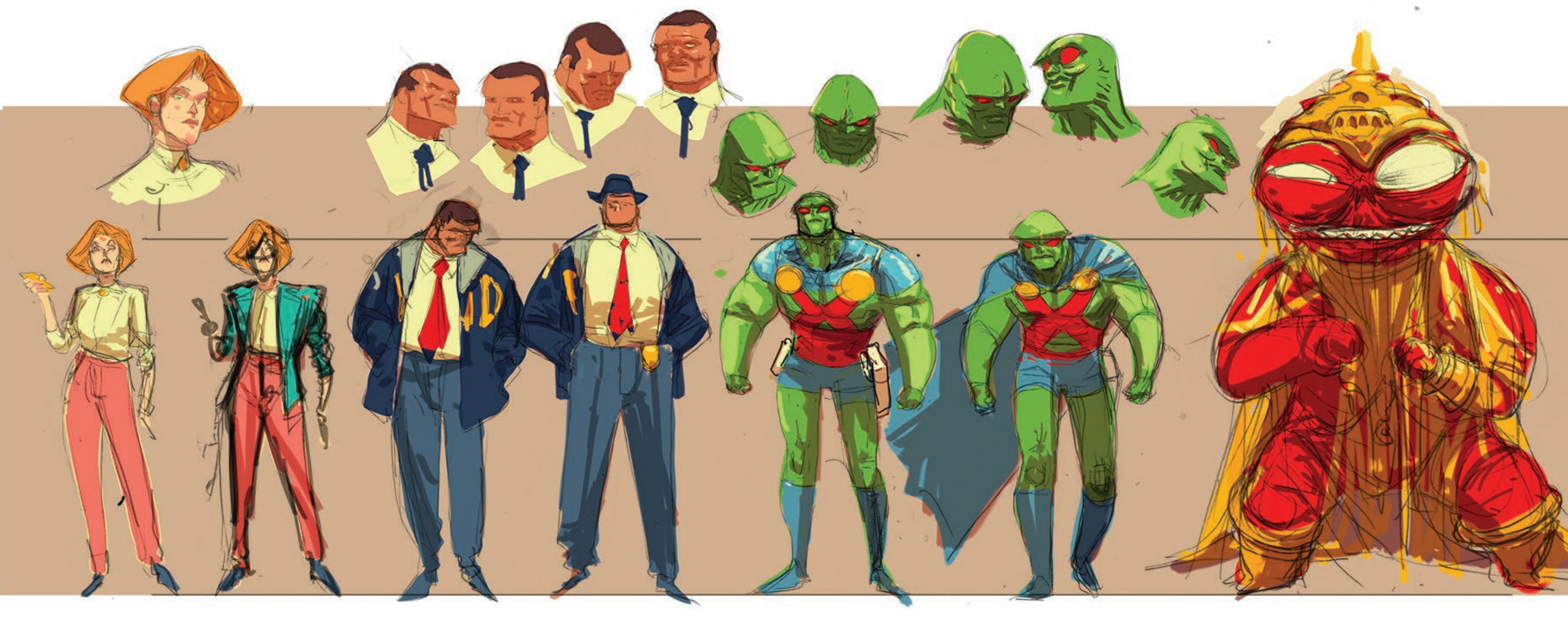
Orlando: I think the thing is, I do visualize things. But the more I work with someone, the benefit is that rather than just a general idea in my head if I don't know the person, I start to use my co-creator's style as a lens. I've worked with ACO many times. I have to say, writers who respect their co-creators write for those co-creators. So it's not just that I'll think about a page from *Wonder Woman* and know it's for ACO, because if Olivier [Coipel] was drawing that book I'd be envisioning things a different way than if I was scripting it for ACO. And that comes from work on my end to get to know you. But yes, I'm visualizing things and thinking about the beats, especially from a basic blocking standpoint of what's on the page in order to answer 'what do we need to get done?'

But how those things get done… I go back and look at someone's work to see how they like to approach story as well. And then I develop the lens for how things might best work. So even from a writing standpoint I'm always thinking about the style and interests of an artist I'm working with.

On a basic level, if someone tells you they hate drawing roses, don't do a book with Swamp Thing in it. But on a practical level, I think it's more than that. When you see what interests people and you see what type of storytelling excites them, you write for that. If you're a songwriter, you don't write a Garth Brooks song for Lady Gaga. I mean, you could… but the point is, the more synchronicity and the more collaboration you have on your mind, the book comes out better.

That sort of love and passion goes on the page because we talk, we communicate, and I know the things that interest you and challenge you, and I know you want to be challenged. Especially after this long, it's exciting and pleasing to me when I'm right, but it's even more exciting when I'm wrong and I think, "Oh man, I never would have thought that this story would have turned this way." That energy is really special.

Anyone can make a comic and not have it work this way. I could turn in five-panel pages every page for twenty pages and we'd still get a comic at the end, but it wouldn't have the energy of the stuff that we do.

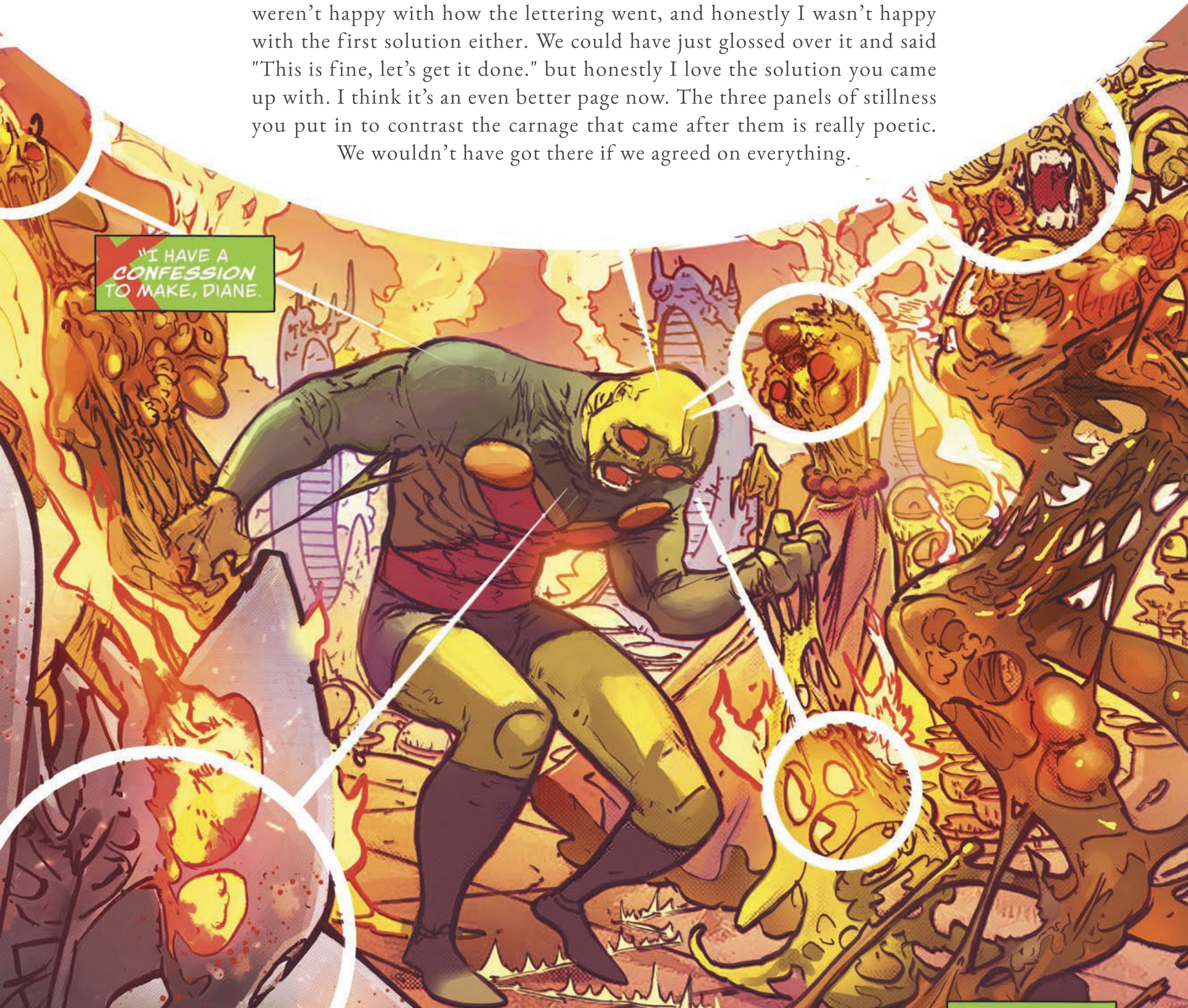


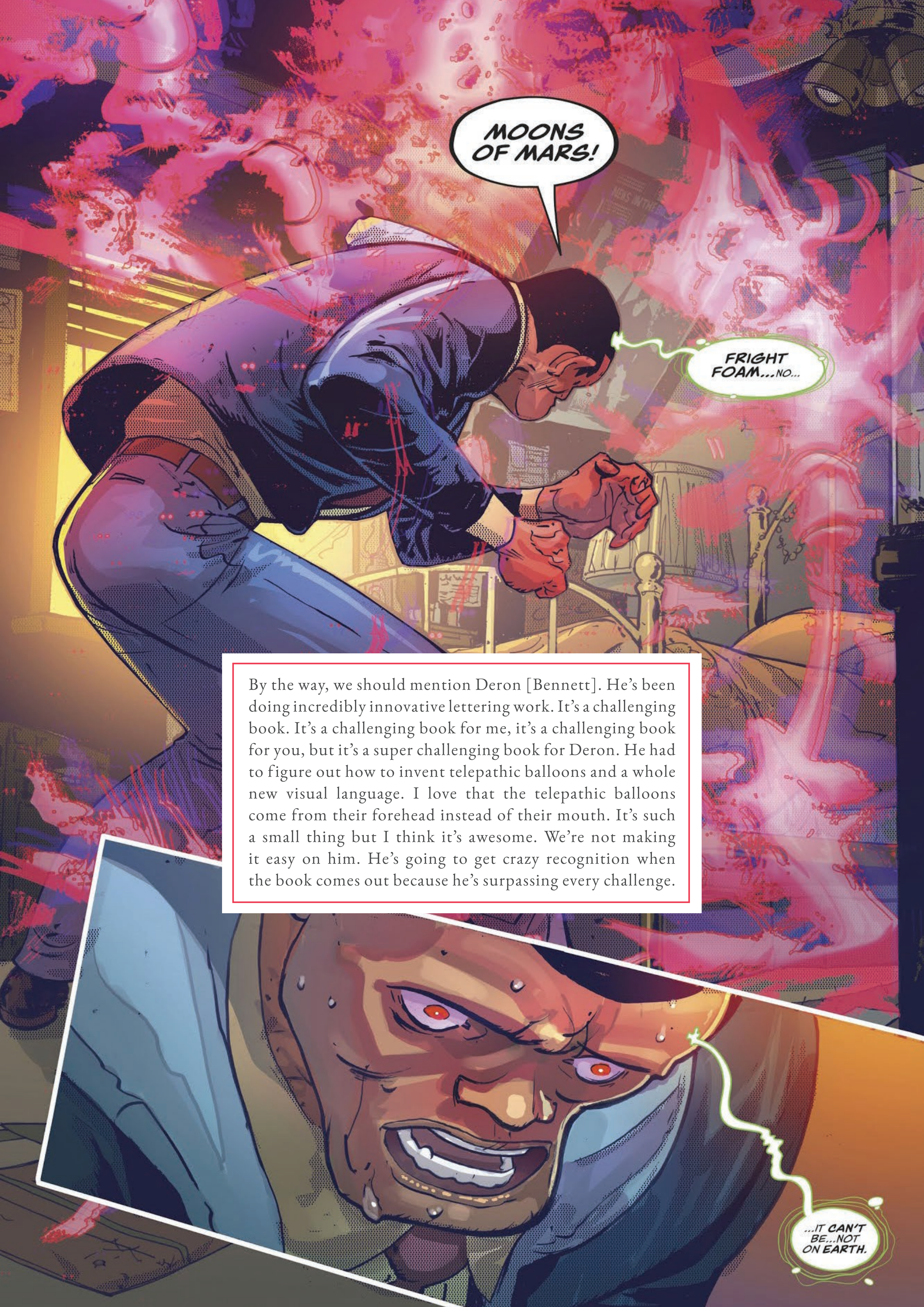
Rossmo: I really appreciate it. It doesn't work like this with everyone, but I appreciate that when I work with you I feel like the pacing works out and that you're not always calling out how many panels per page. Depending on who you're working with, sometimes it's helpful, but not always.

I think I second-guess things more than you do. I draw some things with the intent to try to interpret and psychically figure out how to support you on the page. Like on the nine-panel page we just finished, when he turns into his Martian Manhunter persona, I made him shy, but then I started to think to myself, "Is that right? Did I draw him too shy?" That's the type of thing I agonize about and will go to bed thinking about.

Orlando: I second-guess, too, but you're rarely subjected to it. You're already out the door and on to the next issue when I'm up at night worrying about dialogue. Inevitably, my lettering passes are, "how much of this shit can I cut in order to get out of the way of Riley."

When people see issue one, there's a car crash scene near the end. You weren't happy with how the lettering went, and honestly I wasn't happy with the first solution either. We could have just glossed over it and said "This is fine, let's get it done." but honestly I love the solution you came up with. I think it's an even better page now. The three panels of stillness you put in to contrast the carnage that came after them is really poetic. We wouldn't have got there if we agreed on everything.


"I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE, DIANE.


MOONS OF MARS!
FRIGHT FOAM...NO...
...IT CAN'T BE...NOT ON EARTH.

By the way, we should mention Deron [Bennett]. He's been doing incredibly innovative lettering work. It's a challenging book. It's a challenging book for me, it's a challenging book for you, but it's a super challenging book for Deron. He had to figure out how to invent telepathic balloons and a whole new visual language. I love that the telepathic balloons come from their forehead instead of their mouth. It's such a small thing but I think it's awesome. We're not making it easy on him. He's going to get crazy recognition when the book comes out because he's surpassing every challenge.

Rossmo: I feel like the lettering isn't my department but we have really interesting visual effects in this book and a cool visual language and we all had to come together for all the pieces to work. I like that it's wasn't just that everyone's work was siloed. On all levels we're coming together. Like little bits of stuff like the 'fwoosh' on that car crash page...we could have left that out and it would have been fine. It would just be *fine.* But it changed the dynamic of that moment. It changed that car-crash scene. Before that, in my mind I heard that squeaky sound - you know that sound that they add to movies after a car crash, like the sound of wheels spinning?

Orlando: Like there's a hubcap rolling around somewhere?

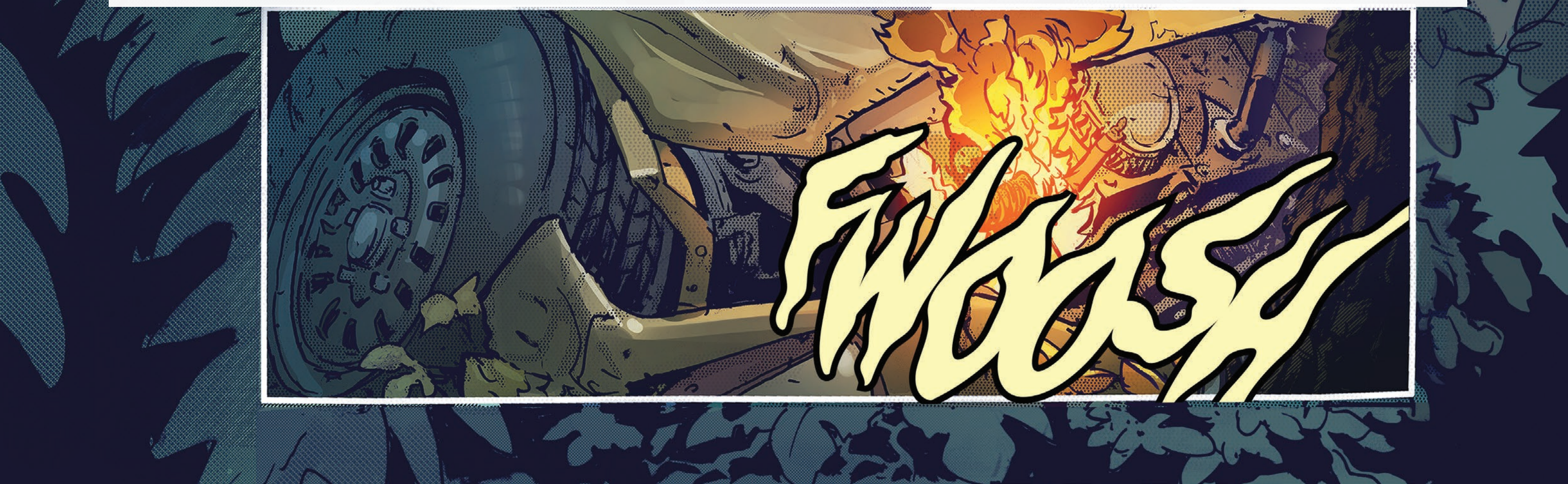
Rossmo: Yeah, something! But when you put a 'fwoosh' in, it gets rid of that squeaky sound and it changes the mood. It's better.

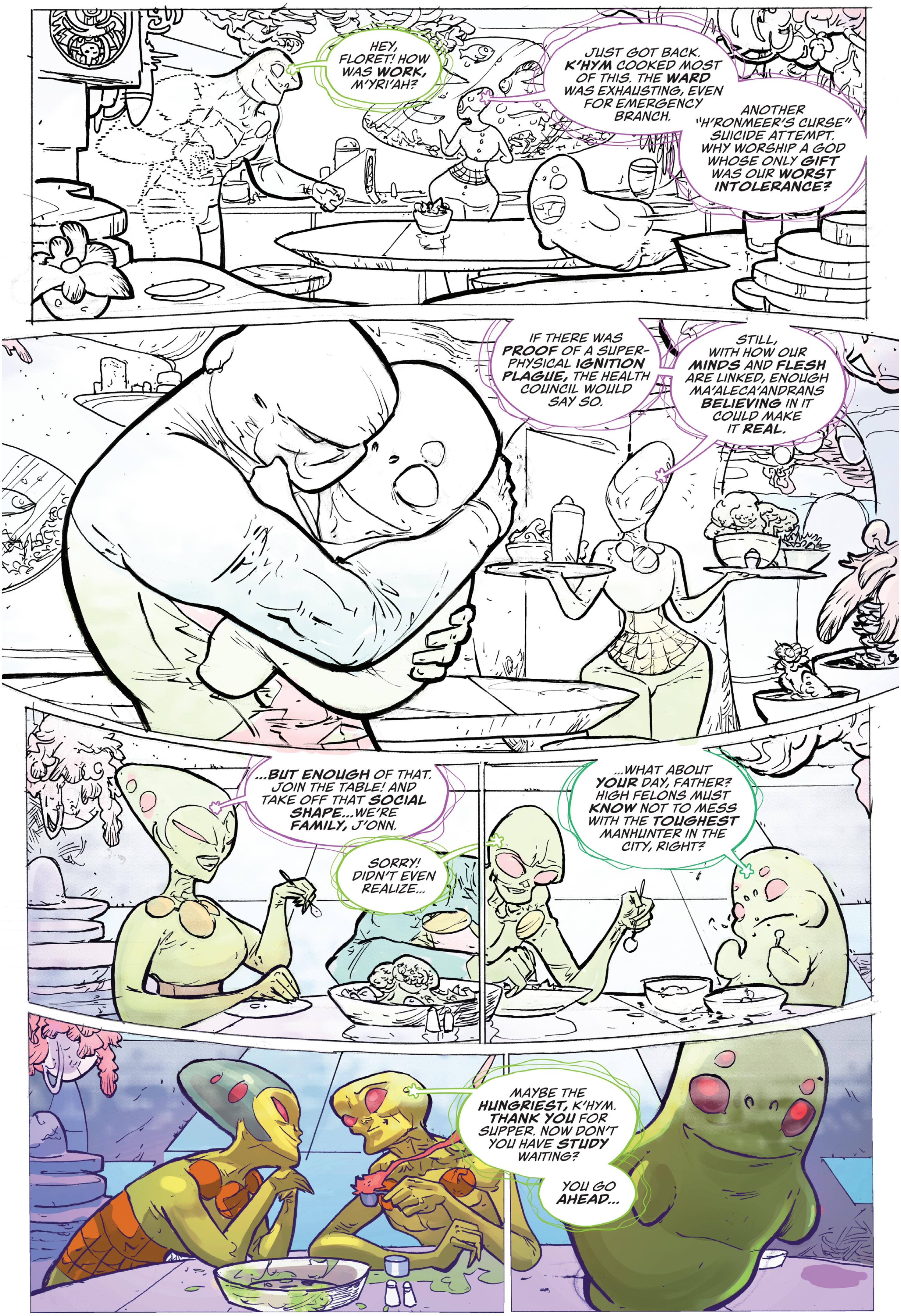
Orlando: On the topic of mood, I wanted to go back to the Mars culture aspect of things. You have very strong ideas from an artistic standpoint about how you present your storytelling when we're on Earth and how you change your storytelling on Mars and how you modify your line art between those two worlds. What's the breakdown for people coming to the book of how you change your style between the two worlds of Mars and Earth? I know you have different rules and I think people would be really interested to hear more about them.

Rossmo: On any comic page, there's opportunities to use formal aspects of a page - boxes or borders or negative space - to tell a story, but if you use things that are too gimmicky they get in the way. Although, you shouldn't *not* use something just because it's gimmicky! So on Mars, there's only lines, with no spot blacks at all. Working without spot blacks isn't something I like to do, and it's an uncomfortable place to work in. It puts a lot of responsibility on our colorist Ivan [Plascencia], too. If there's heavy shadows it's easier for him to figure out where a page is going from a color standpoint. So on Mars there's only line work, and we worked out a color palette that's a lot more vibrant than the present timeline on Earth.

And, to make sure that the reader really gets it, to differentiate between Mars and Earth, Mars always has round panels. There's always one panel edge that's rounded or has a curved border. It adds to the Mars-ness of it. It's sort of an arbitrary decision but it's a quick way for the reader to know they're on Mars. If there's curves, they're on Mars. They'll get it right away.

On Earth there's a lot of heavy shadows and lots of negative space. When I'm drawing an issue it's like I'm drawing two books because the Mars stuff is so distinct from the Earth stuff. On one issue - number two or three - I did all the Mars stuff first and then did all the Earth stuff. And it screwed me up. I felt out of practice on one style or the other if I didn't switch back and forth.




HEY, FLORET! HOW WAS **WORK,** M'YRI'AH?
JUST GOT BACK. **K'HYM** COOKED MOST OF THIS. THE **WARD** WAS EXHAUSTING, EVEN FOR EMERGENCY BRANCH.
ANOTHER "H'RONMEER'S CURSE" SUICIDE ATTEMPT. WHY WORSHIP A GOD WHOSE ONLY **GIFT** WAS OUR **WORST INTOLERANCE?**
IF THERE WAS **PROOF** OF A SUPER-PHYSICAL **IGNITION PLAGUE,** THE HEALTH COUNCIL WOULD SAY SO.
STILL, WITH HOW OUR **MINDS** AND **FLESH** ARE LINKED, ENOUGH MA'ALECA'ANDRANS **BELIEVING** IN IT COULD MAKE IT **REAL.**
...BUT ENOUGH OF THAT. JOIN THE TABLE! AND TAKE OFF THAT **SOCIAL SHAPE**...WE'RE **FAMILY,** J'ONN.
SORRY! DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE...
...WHAT ABOUT **YOUR** DAY, FATHER? HIGH FELONS MUST **KNOW** NOT TO MESS WITH THE **TOUGHEST** MANHUNTER IN THE CITY, RIGHT?
MAYBE THE **HUNGRIEST,** K'HYM. **THANK YOU** FOR SUPPER. NOW DON'T YOU HAVE **STUDY** WAITING?
YOU GO **AHEAD...**

Orlando: On the Mars design stuff, well, everyone who's seen our design for the J'Onzz family, especially their daughter and the way you get emotion out of her, gets really excited, and sad, since most people know what's coming. I know you've put a lot of yourself on the page in the J'Onn and K'Hym stuff. How is it working on those pages? In issue two, there's a scene where J'Onn picks up K'Hym from school, and every time I show someone those pages they just sort of melt, which is a poor choice of words knowing what's going to happen on Mars. I think they're incredible pages, but you say it's been a bit of a challenge for you. How's that been?

Rossmo: It's emotionally devastating. It's getting worse, actually. As my daughter gets older those moments are going away. Those moments where she's super excited to get picked up from daycare are fading and I think it's coming out in the work I'm doing. It's hard some days. But the worst part is when I start to get in the fun of it and feel part of their family, there's that bit… that, 'well, everyone's going to get melted' feeling.

Orlando: Oh man, well…

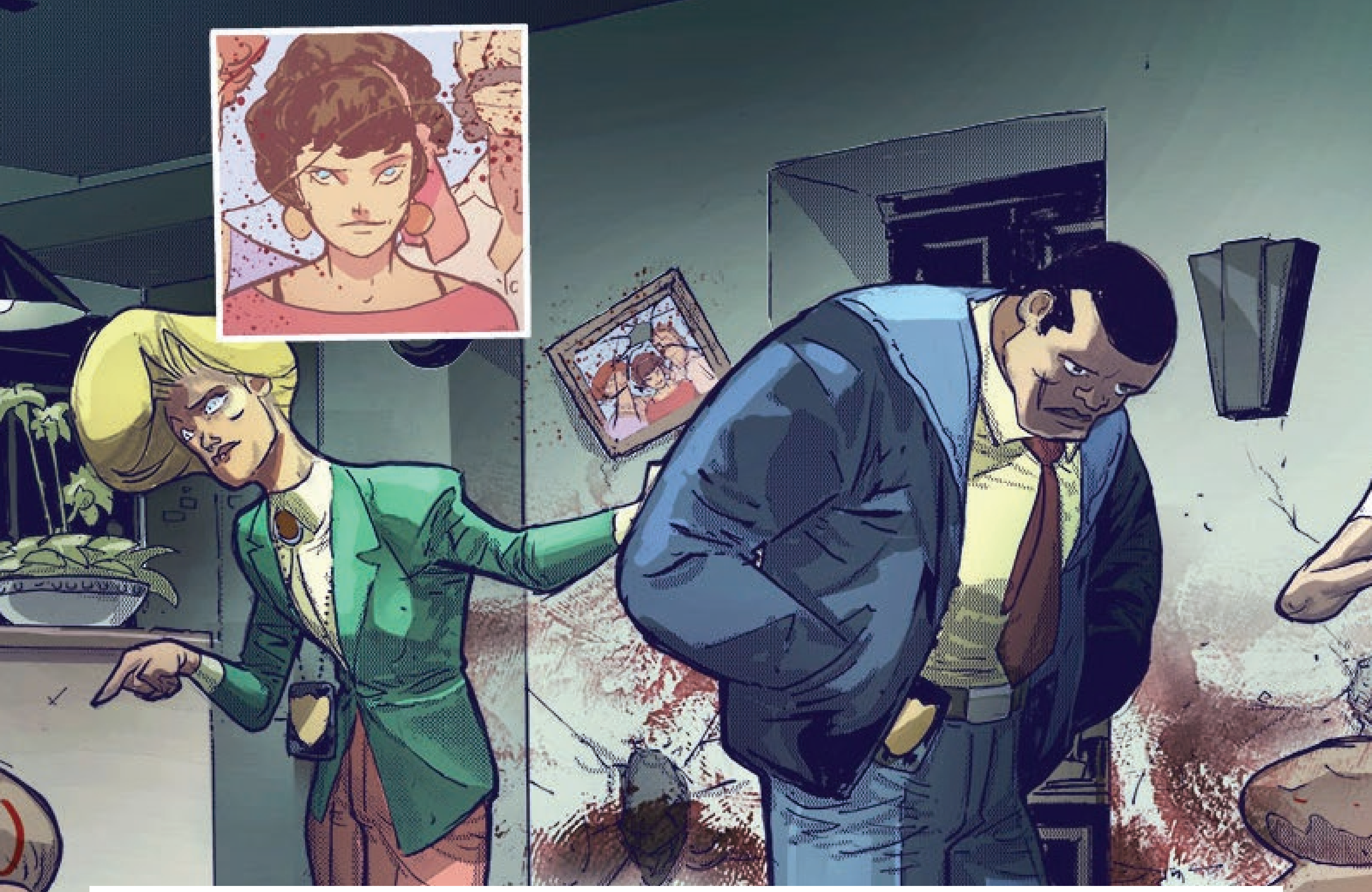
Rossmo: I kind of want an out. I don't know if you feel like that when you're writing it or if that part connects with you… but Steve, it's not too late to change it. We could change the outcome of Mars. They could get teleported off Mars. I think about it once in a while since I spend a lot of time with them. We could still save them. Clearly, we're not, but…

Orlando: It's like *Titanic*. You already know the ending. It's hard. I'm writing issue six and there's a lot of stuff relating to the death of Mars in there. I don't want to blow up your life, but that's one of the gems of the book. There's a lot of me in J'Onn and a lot of you in J'Onn, but they're different aspects of his life being unified in him. His having something inside of him that he feels he needs to hide on Earth, and him not seeing The Martian Manhunter as a positive aspect of his personality. We physically see this in him from the outside in issue one, and knowing he can pass as being Detective John Jones, a lot of that inner conflict that he has to work through comes from me. I'm half Jewish and I'm bisexual and those are both things that I could easily not talk about and hide and slip through society, but how do you feel good about yourself when you internalize that? You have to unify your aspects and be proud of everything you've done and everything that's inside you. That's part of what *Martian Manhunter* is about for me. It's about his road to becoming The Martian Manhunter, his road to becoming a hero.

Those aspects are what has always attracted me to his character, but I think it's an unexpected surprise now that I've gotten in his head and have more insight. And Riley, I sold you on the book as a creative opportunity, but I didn't really consider that there's a lot of you in J'Onn as well and it's from the other side of his personality… his fatherhood, he's a family man, he's this person that'll do anything to provide for and protect his family, even at the cost of his own soul as we start to see in the book.

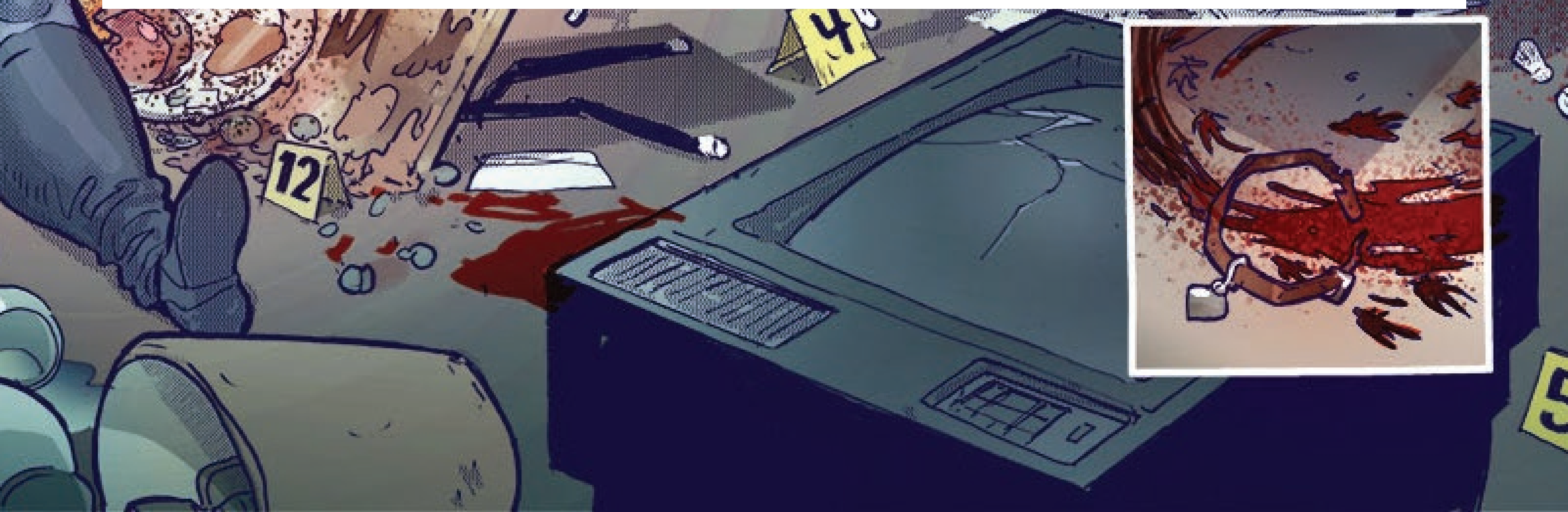
Rossmo: So, how did you get there? Has it been brewing in you a long time? Or was it our collaboration that really opened that door? There's all these thematic things and these parallels…

Orlando: I think it's been one of the surprises of digging into this book and digging into this character. He's always been one of my favorite characters but you have to really spend time with a character to sort of see the note behind the note. I don't think I really knew why until we started working on the book. I used to say it was his humility and his alien-ness but I don't think I really knew what that meant until I spent a long time with him and dug into who he is and what he does. I learned a lot. He's always been my favorite character but, much like the coming out experience, only in hindsight can you look back and think, "Oh, that all makes sense." But you don't always know at the time why things are the way they are. Hindsight is everything. I now know, more than ever, why he's the character I identify with the most. It's a rare opportunity that someone is afforded a chance to spend as much time with a character they love as we're getting. I know much more about myself in relation to The Martian Manhunter now than when we started. And we're not even close to done. You're on issue four and I'm on issue six, so who knows how we're gonna feel once we polish off issue twelve.



On that note, you pay attention to the characters in a way I feel is really special in an artist. There's so much subtle storytelling in the way that the detectives - Diane Meade and John Jones - interact. People will see it when issue one comes out in their body language and how their relationship is scene blocked. Blocking is something that's more theatre-based but I think it applies to every scene Diane and John are in.

Rossmo: In the beginning of their relationship, it's about contrast. I had to make them contrast. The other stuff didn't start leaking in until after I spent time with them. Initially I just wanted them to contrast visually. Diane, to me anyways, is more excitable and aggressive. It was important that she have more presence in a room than John. So she's...well the upper part of her is an upside-down triangle. To contrast, John is mellow and reserved and he's going through a lot. Whatever's happening outside...he's controlling his emotions inside, so he's rounded. In my mind, visually, well he's not as down as you are, Steve, but his whole body cascades down all the time. He's always looking up from under his eyebrows. Diane, her hair is swept up, she's lifted up in all environments she's in, she's billowing. It's like there's a fan blowing air underneath her to make everything rise up while John's pulled down. It just happened initially out of the geometric shapes I was using to contrast them. That's as basic as I can describe. Diane's more take-charge and John supports her.



Orlando: I love that. One thing I've learned, and what I think people will see when this book comes out, is that *everything* matters. I think that readers will sometimes overlook some things... but with your storytelling and with the schedule that we have, no decision is by chance and I think that's special. Diane's shape and how her hair plays on the page; everything speaks to character. I get excited when you talk about your thought process, Riley. It's a level you don't always get in comics due to production schedules and time you do (or don't) have, but you're getting it in *Martian Manhunter* because we're lucky to have the time to make everything matter. Obviously we know that as the story develops the villains will come to a head, the crime scene from issue one will come to a head, and the book morphs into even more than it appears to be in issue one. Even then, the choices you're making are all purposeful and cool. Even the incidental design choices, like focusing on certain animals in nature scenes, have a significance. I try to use owls to symbolize moments of realization for John, but there's even more that you're doing.

Rossmo: We have a lot of moths. Moths and caterpillars are featured pretty prominently throughout. That explains itself, right?

Orlando: It does!

Rossmo: To take it back to the Earth characters a little bit, I feel like we both have our personal relationships with John, but how do you feel about Diane? Who is she to you? How are you her?

Orlando: Both John and Diane are aspects of things I've dealt with, but they're very different. A lot of Diane's character comes from her being a woman from a small town - Houma, Louisiana - which is where *Swamp Thing* takes place. I put that in there for you, Riley. She's from a conservative town, and she's a woman in a predominantly male dominated field, so a lot of Diane's attitude and wit and her sarcasm is how she covers for the expectations put upon her and predispositions people have towards her. I've dealt with that in my life. When someone finds out that I'm part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum they make immediate assumptions. There's a saying, 'when you're part of any marginalized community you have to work twice as hard for half as much,' that rings true. So a lot of Diane's gruffness and how she covers when she's clearly uncomfortable with sarcasm comes from that part of my personality. It's a different part of the same thing that informs John for me, but it's a very real part.

Going beyond that, there's parts of the Mars cast that are very important to me, specifically making M'yri'ah the character that she is. Traditionally she hasn't had a lot of attention and we don't know a lot about her, but here in the Mars scenes she's an equal standing member of the family with J'Onn. In some ways, she's the more aggressive one. Especially as the series progresses. She's the one encouraging J'Onn and saying that he should stand up for himself and not just try to make up for the legacy of his misbehaving brother. M'Yri'Ah really believes in J'Onn and she's a strong pivot point in their family, which is important to me. Depicting her as a fully fleshed character is essential. She probably has a more important job than J'Onn in some ways since she's an Emergency Room doctor.

Rossmo: Did you know she was? I think she's way more put together than J'Onn. Once you spend time with them I think it becomes apparent that she's the one that knows what's going on and keeps the family together.

Orlando: The tragedy is that she's still held back by institution. M'Yri'Ah is a brilliant telepathic and physical doctor but the government and Health Council aren't listening. I'm very proud of what we've done with her. And she doesn't take any shit. There's a complexity to her that's special. She loves J'Onn but she's not an idiot. They're a real family.

Rossmo: Let's get back to our Earth leads. How would you describe John in a few words?

Orlando: He's got a foot in two worlds. How would you?

Rossmo: He's self-conscious. He's not always present. What about Diane?

Orlando: They have different styles. Diane slaps John back to reality.

Rossmo: Yeah, Diane's a presence in every room. She's got the spotlight.

Orlando: It's important to note that they're both very effective detectives. While their styles are polar opposites, they're very good at their jobs. Just in very different ways. Jones is very caring of Diane. Their interplay and how they balance each other out is why his betrayal - not telling her that he's an alien living in her dead partner's body - means so much. Because to her, Jones is her brother and her closest friend and it's surreal to her that she doesn't know which of her memories were with J'Onn J'Onzz and which were with Detective John Jones.

Rossmo: You write them comfortable together. Do you think about that? They feel comfortable to me, but maybe that's because I spend a lot of time with them.

Orlando: From a craft standpoint, that's why I write rough dialogue in the script. As much as it's nice to do it all after the art comes in, what they say to each other matters. It's part of character. It's why the format we use is what I think is the ideal format. There's a whole extra layer of characterization that comes from how they actually speak to each other and how they interact. They know each other deeply. Like in issue two, she says "Jones knows that I don't smoke but keeps a pack in his desk for when I do." They know the imperfections that each other has and that's what comes from being really close to someone. It's part of the plan!

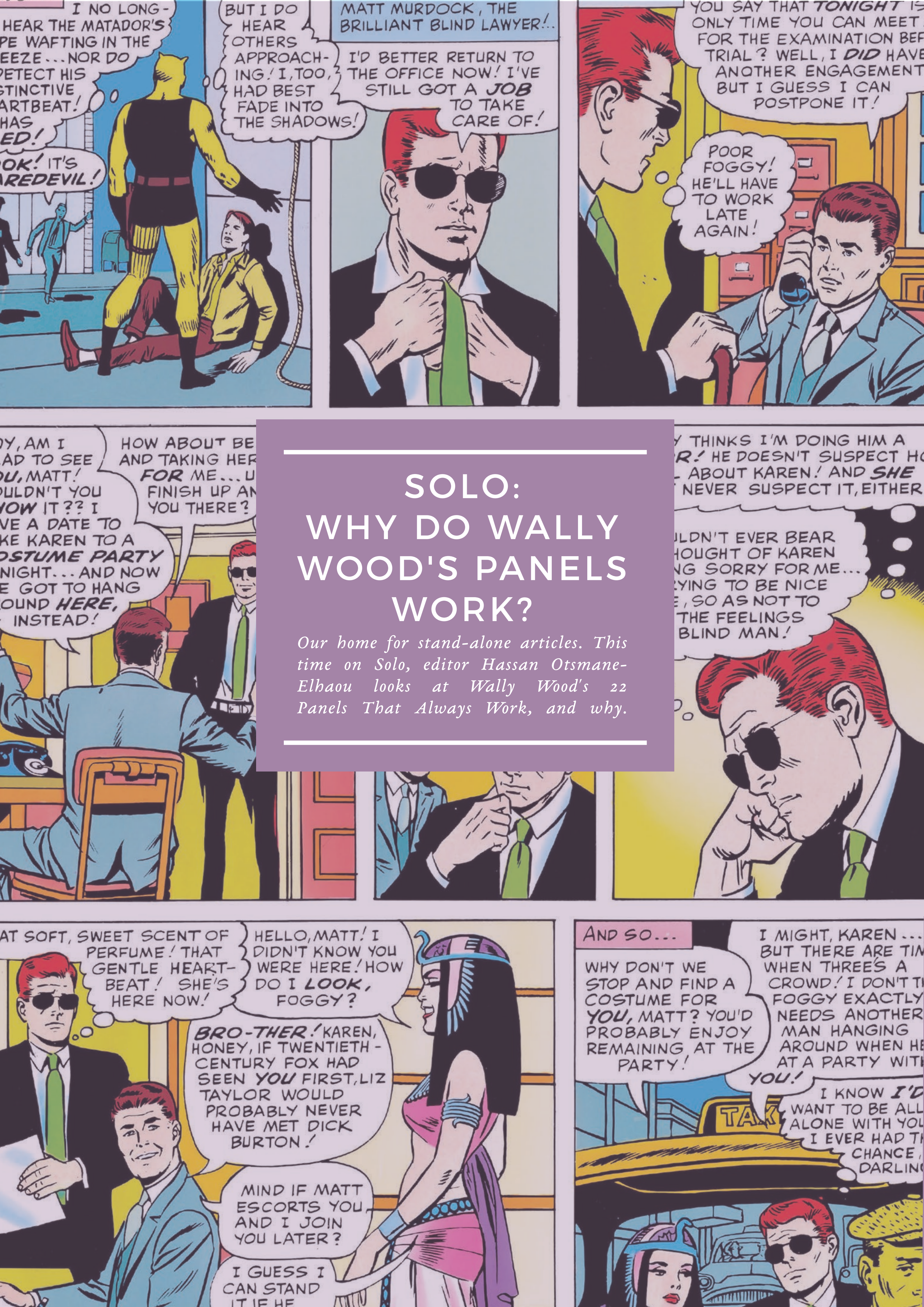
Rossmo: Can we talk about the villain?

Orlando: Ahhhhhhhhh, let's not talk about that yet. Maybe you can talk about your design sense for them? But let's not spoil it in this interview.

Rossmo: Ok I can wait.

Orlando: Thanks Riley. We'll talk soon.

This article was originally featured in our Year in Review *issue, #18. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO18*


I NO LONG- HEAR THE MATADOR'S PE WAFTING IN THE EEZE... NOR DO ETECT HIS STINCTIVE ARTBEAT! HAS ED!
OK! IT'S AREDEVIL!
BUT I DO HEAR OTHERS APPROACH-ING! I, TOO, HAD BEST FADE INTO THE SHADOWS!
MATT MURDOCK, THE BRILLIANT BLIND LAWYER!..
I'D BETTER RETURN TO THE OFFICE NOW! I'VE STILL GOT A JOB TO TAKE CARE OF!
YOU SAY THAT TONIGHT IS ONLY TIME YOU CAN MEET FOR THE EXAMINATION BEF TRIAL? WELL, I DID HAVE ANOTHER ENGAGEMENT BUT I GUESS I CAN POSTPONE IT!
POOR FOGGY! HE'LL HAVE TO WORK LATE AGAIN!
DY, AM I AD TO SEE OU, MATT! OULDN'T YOU NOW IT?? I VE A DATE TO KE KAREN TO A OSTUME PARTY NIGHT... AND NOW E GOT TO HANG OUND HERE, INSTEAD!
HOW ABOUT BE AND TAKING HER FOR ME... U FINISH UP AN YOU THERE?
Y THINKS I'M DOING HIM A R! HE DOESN'T SUSPECT HO ABOUT KAREN! AND SHE NEVER SUSPECT IT, EITHER
ULDN'T EVER BEAR HOUGHT OF KAREN NG SORRY FOR ME... YING TO BE NICE , SO AS NOT TO THE FEELINGS BLIND MAN!
AT SOFT, SWEET SCENT OF PERFUME! THAT GENTLE HEART-BEAT! SHE'S HERE NOW!
HELLO, MATT! I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE HERE! HOW DO I LOOK, FOGGY?
BRO-THER! KAREN, HONEY, IF TWENTIETH-CENTURY FOX HAD SEEN YOU FIRST, LIZ TAYLOR WOULD PROBABLY NEVER HAVE MET DICK BURTON!
MIND IF MATT ESCORTS YOU, AND I JOIN YOU LATER?
I GUESS I CAN STAND IT IF HE
AND SO...
WHY DON'T WE STOP AND FIND A COSTUME FOR YOU, MATT? YOU'D PROBABLY ENJOY REMAINING AT THE PARTY!
I MIGHT, KAREN... BUT THERE ARE TIM WHEN THREE'S A CROWD! I DON'T T FOGGY EXACTLY NEEDS ANOTHER MAN HANGING AROUND WHEN HE AT A PARTY WIT YOU!
I KNOW I'D WANT TO BE ALL ALONE WITH YOU I EVER HAD TH CHANCE DARLIN
TAX

SOLO: WHY DO WALLY WOOD'S PANELS WORK?

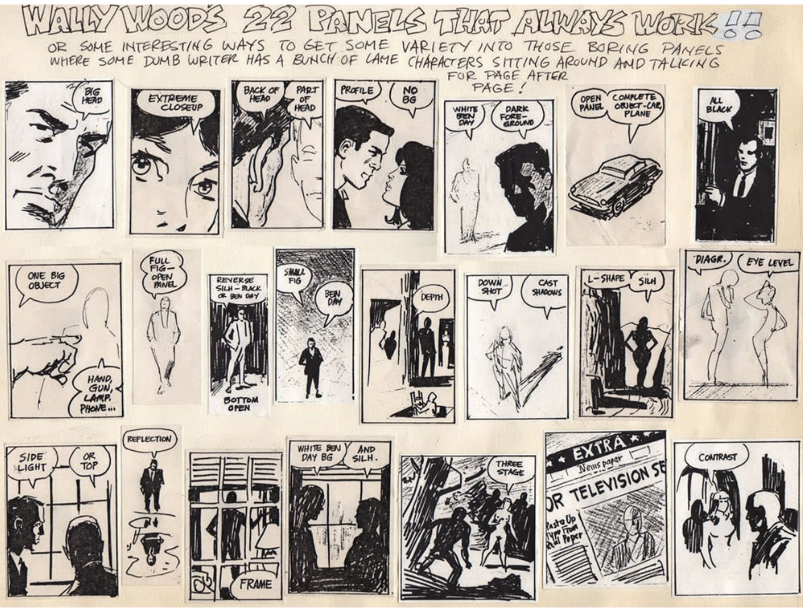
Our home for stand-alone articles. This time on Solo, editor Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou looks at Wally Wood's 22 Panels That Always Work, and why.

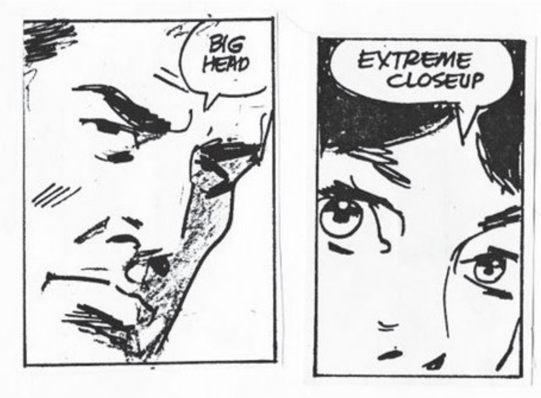
BY HASSAN OTSMANE-ELHAOU

Wally Wood is infamous for a couple of things he said about making comics, likely borne out of the fact he'd gone from making quite a substantial amount of money at *Mad Magazine,* to substantially less money at Marvel. The first, and probably most famous, is Wally Wood's 22 Panels That Always Work, showing off a series of options you can use constantly in comics work to frame conversations in ways that are a little more dynamic. The other is the quote about speed and efficiency of drawing, "Never draw anything you can copy, never copy anything you can trace, never trace anything you can cut out and paste up."

So Wood's reputation exists in part to deal with issues of drawing 20 pages of narrative comics on a monthly deadline. But while that second quote is pretty self-explanatory, his 22 Panels That Always Work are less so. They come with a brief example of the panel description, and dialogue balloons give you the information of what the shot is doing.

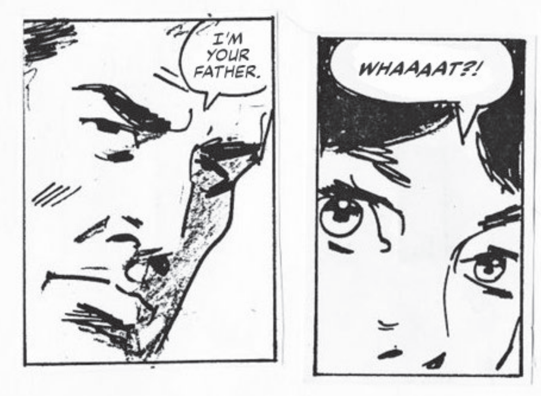
That's always what interested me about this, though, is they describe the shot, but not so much the usage of the shot, or what would be a point to use that image to add additional impact to the scene you'd be drawing. The panels were just, "here's a visual option," and less, "here's how to add specific impact to a character revealing a dramatic plot point," or something similar.


WALLY WOOD'S 22 PANELS THAT ALWAYS WORK!!
OR SOME INTERESTING WAYS TO GET SOME VARIETY INTO THOSE BORING PANELS WHERE SOME DUMB WRITER HAS A BUNCH OF LAME CHARACTERS SITTING AROUND AND TALKING FOR PAGE AFTER PAGE!
BIG HEAD
EXTREME CLOSEUP
BACK OF HEAD
PART OF HEAD
PROFILE
NO BG
WHITE BEN DAY
DARK FORE-GROUND
OPEN PANEL
COMPLETE OBJECT-CAR, PLANE
ALL BLACK
ONE BIG OBJECT
HAND, GUN, LAMP, PHONE...
FULL FIG— OPEN PANEL
REVERSE SILH – BLACK OR BEN DAY
BOTTOM OPEN
SMALL FIG
BEN DAY
DEPTH
DOWN SHOT
CAST SHADOWS
L-SHAPE
SILH
DIAGR.
EYE LEVEL
SIDE LIGHT
OR TOP
REFLECTION
FRAME
WHITE BEN DAY BG
AND SILH.
THREE STAGE
EXTRA
News paper
OR TELEVISION SE
Paste Up Type From Real Paper
CONTRAST



There's an example in the very first two panels that Wally Wood suggests always work. The first is the "Big Head" panel, essentially a close-up on a face looking in the direction of the reader. The second is a version of that just pushed in, the "Extreme Closeup."

Now, you could use either of those panels interchanged, but it doesn't mean that the effect of each stays the same. As an example, if you take a moment of dialogue between two characters, where it's leading up to Character A revealing they are actually Character B's father, it may be useful to push in for an Extreme Close-up on Character B's reaction at the end of the sequence. In that case, it frames the importance as a reaction shot of Character B, understanding their life has just changed. Alternatively, you could place that final moment as a close-up on Character A instead, maybe the Big Head panel, to see their full face as they explain.

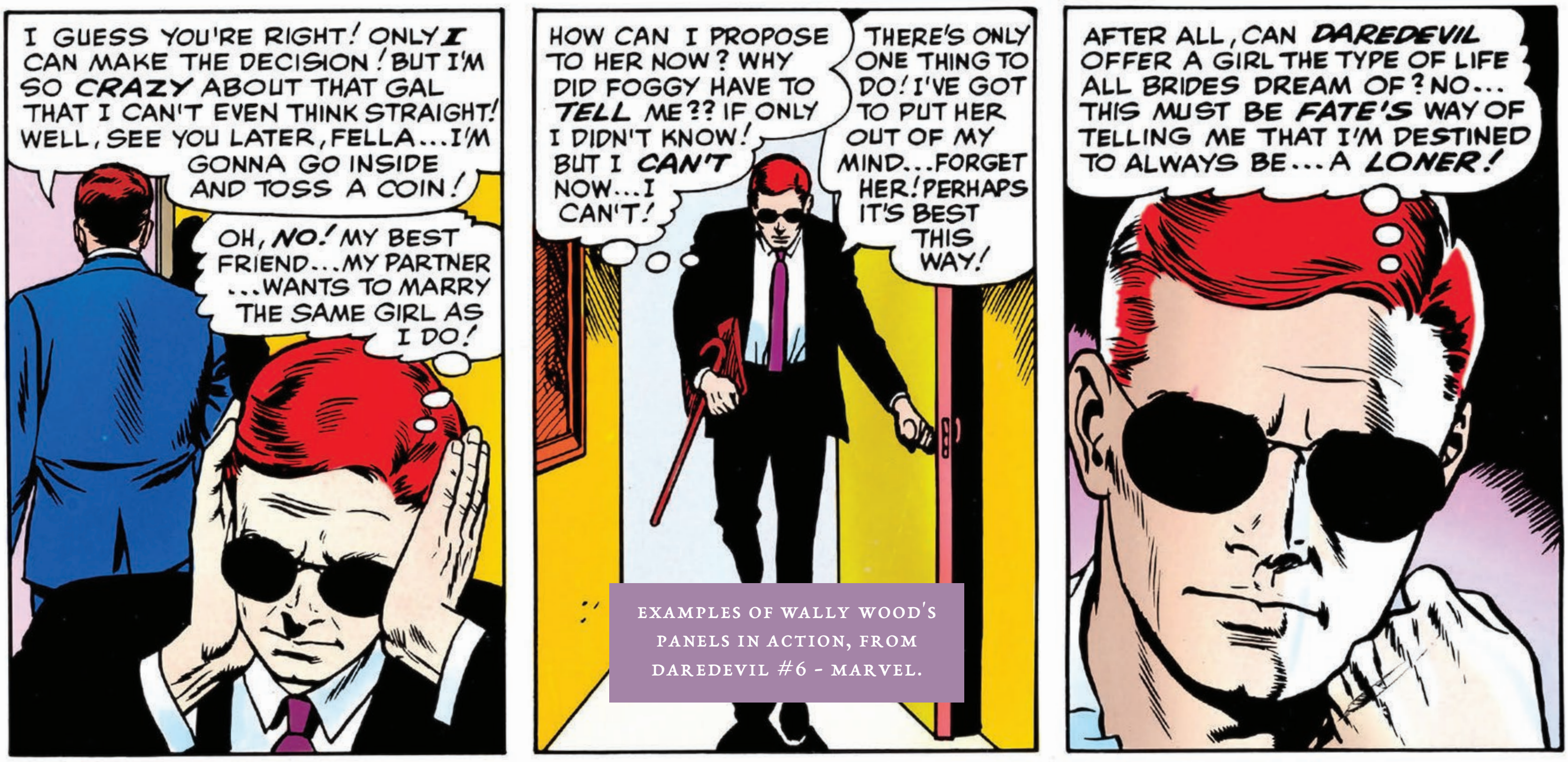

I'M YOUR FATHER.
WHAAAAT?!

Notice the difference? The Extreme Closeup focuses on a specific detail, in this instance the wide-eyes of Character B coming to the realization they're meeting their father. Whereas Character A's Big Head panel means we can see the full gravity of what it takes for them to say this, across their whole face.

Two panels, vaguely similar, but each giving a slightly different effect.

So in a couple of parts to this piece, I wanted to take a look through various panels Wood suggests, and see a series of examples as to how they might be interesting to use. And I think regardless of your approach to comics, if you're an artist or a writer or letterer or reader, seeing what Wally Wood was suggesting, and how he composed these images, is quite interesting as an experiment in understanding the power of visual composition

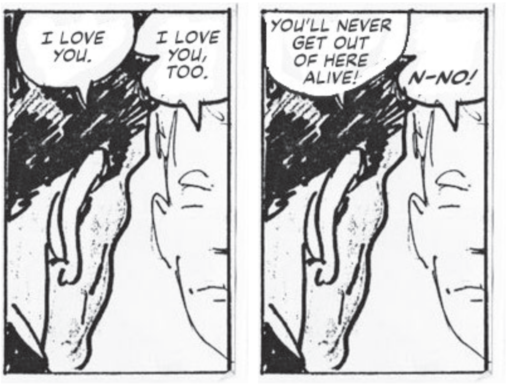
The main takeaway I have with Wood's options are how they're essentially offering the same thing, which is to say something more with the visuals of the scene that just a standard, eye-level talking head shot (not that those can't also be useful in the right context). Likely we've all read comics that have a lot of back and forth dialogue, and when they're focused in one location between two or three players, it's easy to see them being stagnant if the scene continues for a few pages. The reason you can get away with this a lot more in something like film or TV is that actors are constantly "re-framing" the scenes. Even if it's a static long take, actors changing their expressions, moving slightly, whatever, would create multiple images that a comic can capture. Now, obviously you have less space in a comic than 24 panels for every second, so with clever composition you can build in essentially what the acting of a scene would give to the audience, and imbue these moments with a kind of forced perspective and response.


I GUESS YOU'RE RIGHT! ONLY *I* CAN MAKE THE DECISION! BUT I'M SO *CRAZY* ABOUT THAT GAL THAT I CAN'T EVEN THINK STRAIGHT! WELL, SEE YOU LATER, FELLA... I'M GONNA GO INSIDE AND TOSS A COIN!
OH, *NO!* MY BEST FRIEND... MY PARTNER ...WANTS TO MARRY THE SAME GIRL AS I DO!
HOW CAN I PROPOSE TO HER NOW? WHY DID FOGGY HAVE TO *TELL* ME?? IF ONLY I DIDN'T KNOW! BUT I *CAN'T* NOW... I CAN'T!
THERE'S ONLY ONE THING TO DO! I'VE GOT TO PUT HER OUT OF MY MIND... FORGET HER! PERHAPS IT'S BEST THIS WAY!
AFTER ALL, CAN *DAREDEVIL* OFFER A GIRL THE TYPE OF LIFE ALL BRIDES DREAM OF? NO... THIS MUST BE *FATE'S* WAY OF TELLING ME THAT I'M DESTINED TO ALWAYS BE... A *LONER!*

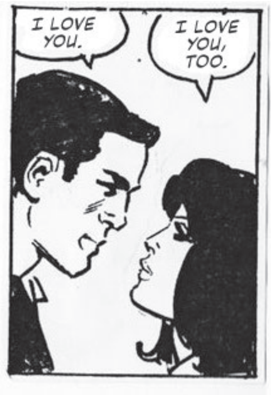
EXAMPLES OF WALLY WOOD'S PANELS IN ACTION, FROM DAREDEVIL #6 - MARVEL.

If you look at option three, the "Back of Head, Part of Head" panel, you can see the difference between that and the Extreme Close-up next to it, or the Profile No BG panel to the right. Where the close-up highlights a particular feature of a face, and the Profile No BG panel shows the closeness of two people, and their connectednesss, the Back of Head, Part of Head restricts everything. The character we want to focus on, the one who's features we can actually see, our emotional entry into that panel, is being restricted and cut-off by the character in the foreground.

So if you had Back of Head saying, "I love you." and Part of Head saying, "I love you, too." that sequence might feel like Part of Head is being suffocated, with that framing. It would work to offset the dialogue and create a clever juxtaposition between words and images. If Back of Head says, "You'll never get out of here alive." and his head takes up more room in the panel, well, the visuals reinforce that idea in a way that visually traps Part of Head.

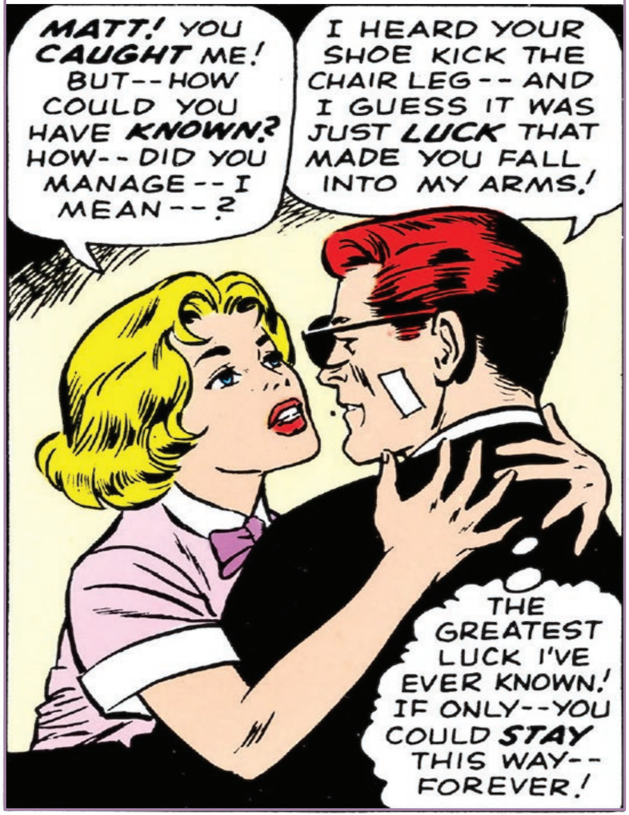

I LOVE YOU.
I LOVE YOU, TOO.
YOU'LL NEVER GET OUT OF HERE ALIVE!
N-NO!

If you took the same, "I love you." dialogue and applied it to option 4, Profile No BG, the result would feel different. Two characters looking into each other's eyes, face on, the background removed so we only focus on them. Profile says, "I love you." and No BG says, "I love you, too."

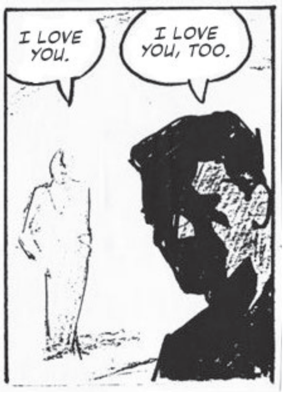

I LOVE YOU.
I LOVE YOU, TOO.

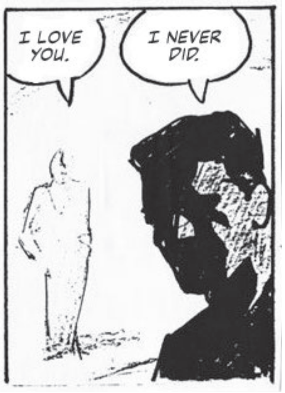
The connotations are immediately different. It'd be a nice way to end that moment, if it was a scene of two characters struggling to profess their love. Finally they come close together, hold each other's gaze, and say what they haven't been able to say for the whole sequence. And again, if you applied that same logic to the previous option, you would dramatically change the intention of the scene.

So maybe you're starting to see how each of these moments gains some narrative traction, even before you add any dialogue into them. And the easiest way to see this is to look at it without words (which, handily, Wood does.)


MATT! YOU CAUGHT ME! BUT--HOW COULD YOU HAVE KNOWN? HOW--DID YOU MANAGE--I MEAN--?
I HEARD YOUR SHOE KICK THE CHAIR LEG--AND I GUESS IT WAS JUST LUCK THAT MADE YOU FALL INTO MY ARMS!
THE GREATEST LUCK I'VE EVER KNOWN! IF ONLY--YOU COULD STAY THIS WAY--FOREVER!

Option 5 is, "White Ben Day, Dark Foreground." With modern printing, that might be more a color wash or something in the backround, but it's the composition choices that are interesting. Without dialogue, you present a character fading in the background, so important to the moment in idea more than specifics. And you place a closer shot of a character in dark lighting, which evokes a mood. In this instance, it feels like maybe a character walking away from facing up to someone else, or having just been rejected by them. If you applied that same, "I love you." dialogue, once again this moment feels entirely different. A character saying, "I love you." in the background, while a character in the foreground, turned and walking away in darkness, says it back. I'm not sure I believe them quite as much as I did in Option 4, and it certainly gives the impression that Dark Foreground is hiding some kind of secret. The tenderness isn't there.

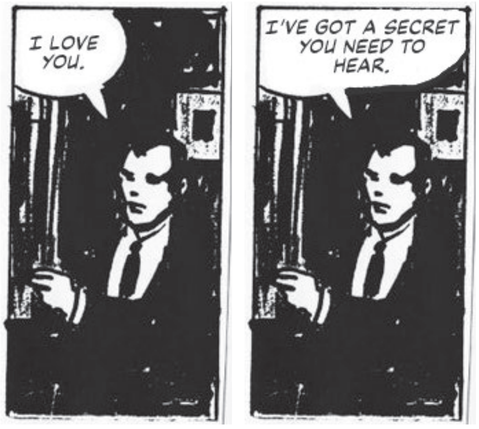

I LOVE YOU.
I LOVE YOU, TOO.


I LOVE YOU.
I NEVER DID.

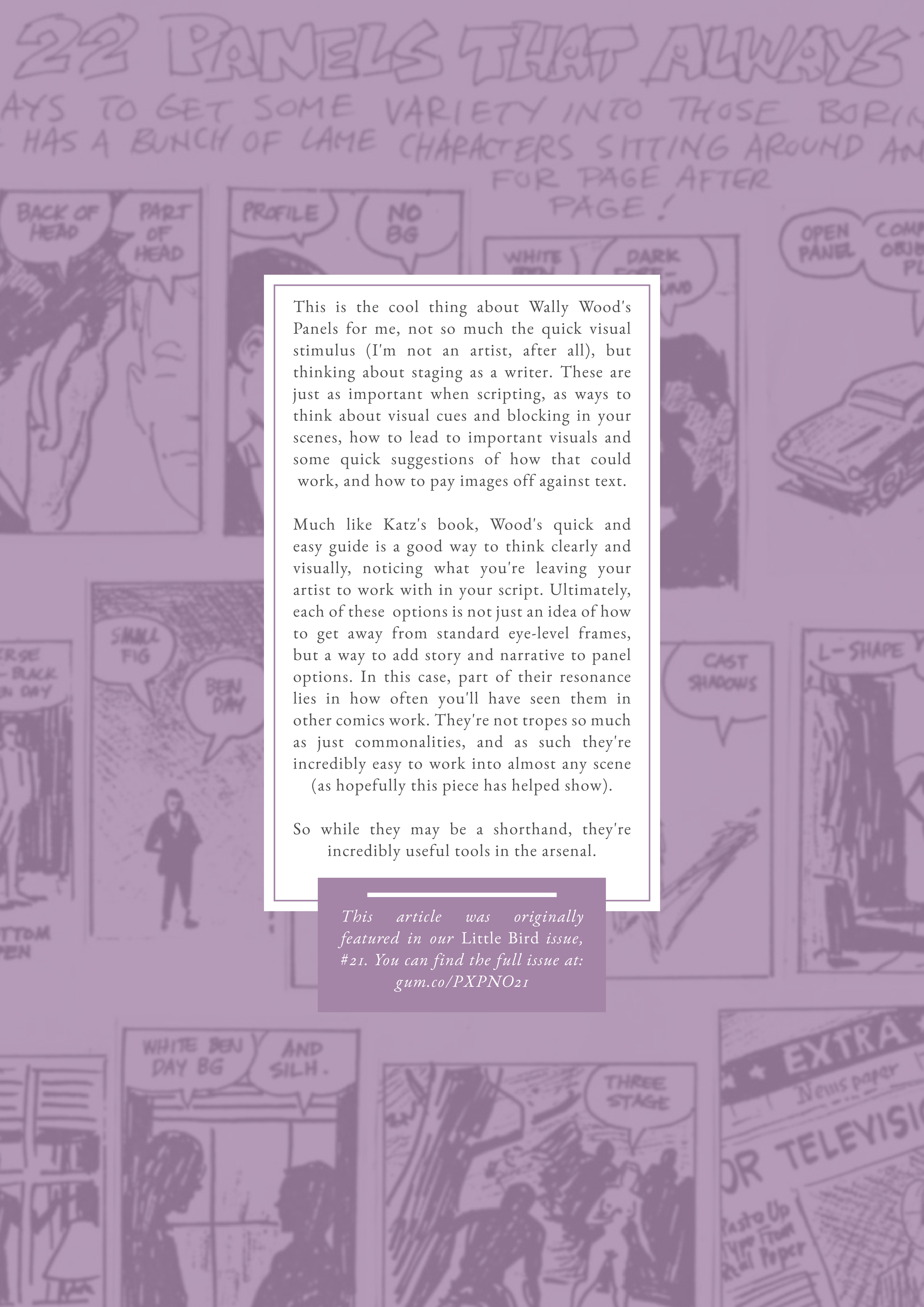
Instead, White Ben Day saying, "I love you." while Dark Foreground says, "I never did." would play off that image in an equally dramatic way, leaning into the connotations rather than against (though that isn't to say it's any more or less powerful).

And here is the first panel specifically playing with light. The others have been pure "camera" and "blocking" choices, where to place the character in relation to the frame and each other, which angle to draw from. But this is the first that deals with contrast and value in the image. It's similar to the Depth panel from the tier below it, in that it's creating some distance between two subjects through blocking (one being further away), but also using light to create contrast between the two figures, which is a useful tool narratively, as discussed.

The "Open Panel, Complete Object" is next, which uses a car as an example, but could be anything that's in the scene. Wood uses a vehicle, but you could arguably also get away with any object that has specific significance in the scene. A gun, rope, birthday card, pen... whatever. It's a simple way to recontextualize location, or topic of conversation, or theme of conversation. If you had, "I love you." playing over an image of a gun that a character had hidden earlier in the scene, that might suggest something different that using the image of a heart-shaped box of chocolates from the desk they're standing next to. One emphasises the connection, one creates discord and intrigue by playing against it.


I LOVE YOU.
I'VE GOT A SECRET YOU NEED TO HEAR.

And the final of tier is one that again deals with lighting, the "All Black" panel. The darkness can be used significantly, creating a much moodier type of panel that some of the more brightly lit ones Wood suggested already. A character entrance would work nicely here, someone appearing out of the darkness to say, "I've got a secret you need to hear." You get emphasis on their face, as it's the brightest part of the moment, but the black around them pervades. If this character was saying "I love you." there's a question mark over intent, or maybe over their future (depending on context). The image allows you to add a little punch to the scene, in that regard. If it's a character about to face their fate, maybe the panel hints it might not be a good end for them. Or if a character issues a nefarious line, this could be a moment to show how the darkness in their dialogue also wraps around them visually.

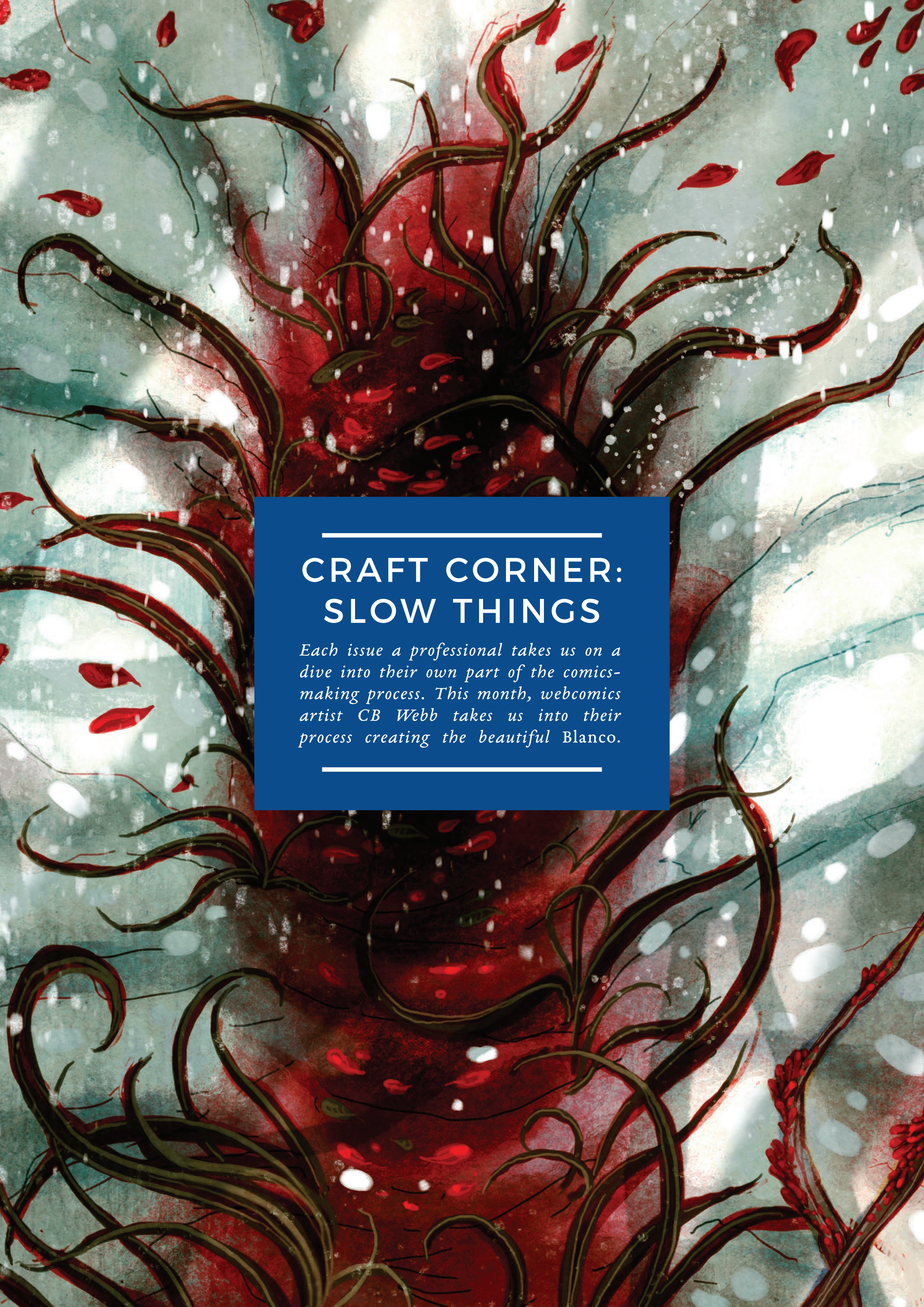

22 PANELS THAT ALWAYS
AYS TO GET SOME VARIETY INTO THOSE BORI
HAS A BUNCH OF LAME CHARACTERS SITTING AROUND AN
FOR PAGE AFTER PAGE!
BACK OF HEAD
PART OF HEAD
PROFILE
NO BG
WHITE
DARK
OPEN PANEL
SMALL FIG
BEN DAY
CAST SHADOWS
L-SHAPE
WHITE BEN DAY BG
AND SILH.
THREE STAGE
EXTRA
News paper
OR TELEVISI
Paste Up Type From Real Paper

This is the cool thing about Wally Wood's Panels for me, not so much the quick visual stimulus (I'm not an artist, after all), but thinking about staging as a writer. These are just as important when scripting, as ways to think about visual cues and blocking in your scenes, how to lead to important visuals and some quick suggestions of how that could work, and how to pay images off against text.

Much like Katz's book, Wood's quick and easy guide is a good way to think clearly and visually, noticing what you're leaving your artist to work with in your script. Ultimately, each of these options is not just an idea of how to get away from standard eye-level frames, but a way to add story and narrative to panel options. In this case, part of their resonance lies in how often you'll have seen them in other comics work. They're not tropes so much as just commonalities, and as such they're incredibly easy to work into almost any scene (as hopefully this piece has helped show).

So while they may be a shorthand, they're incredibly useful tools in the arsenal.

This article was originally featured in our Little Bird *issue, #21. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO21*



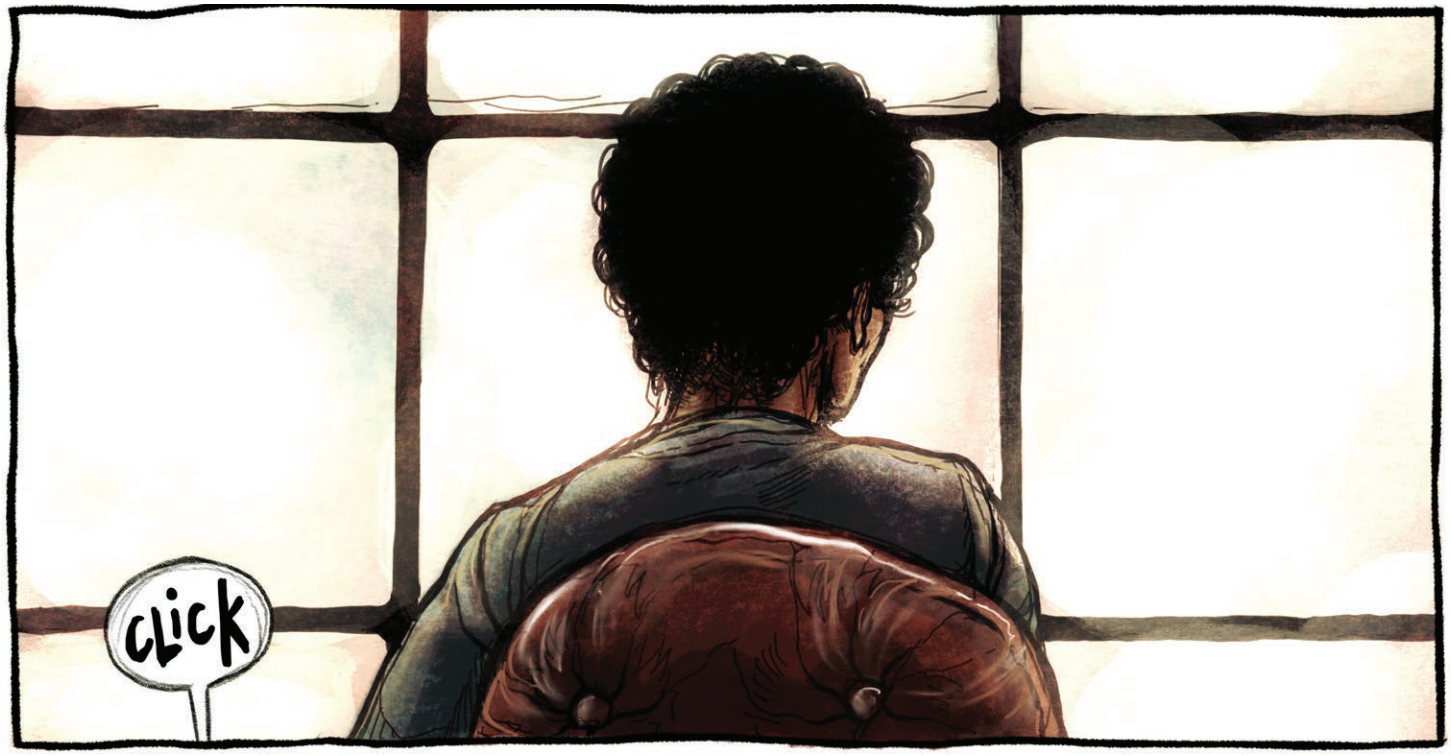
CRAFT CORNER: SLOW THINGS

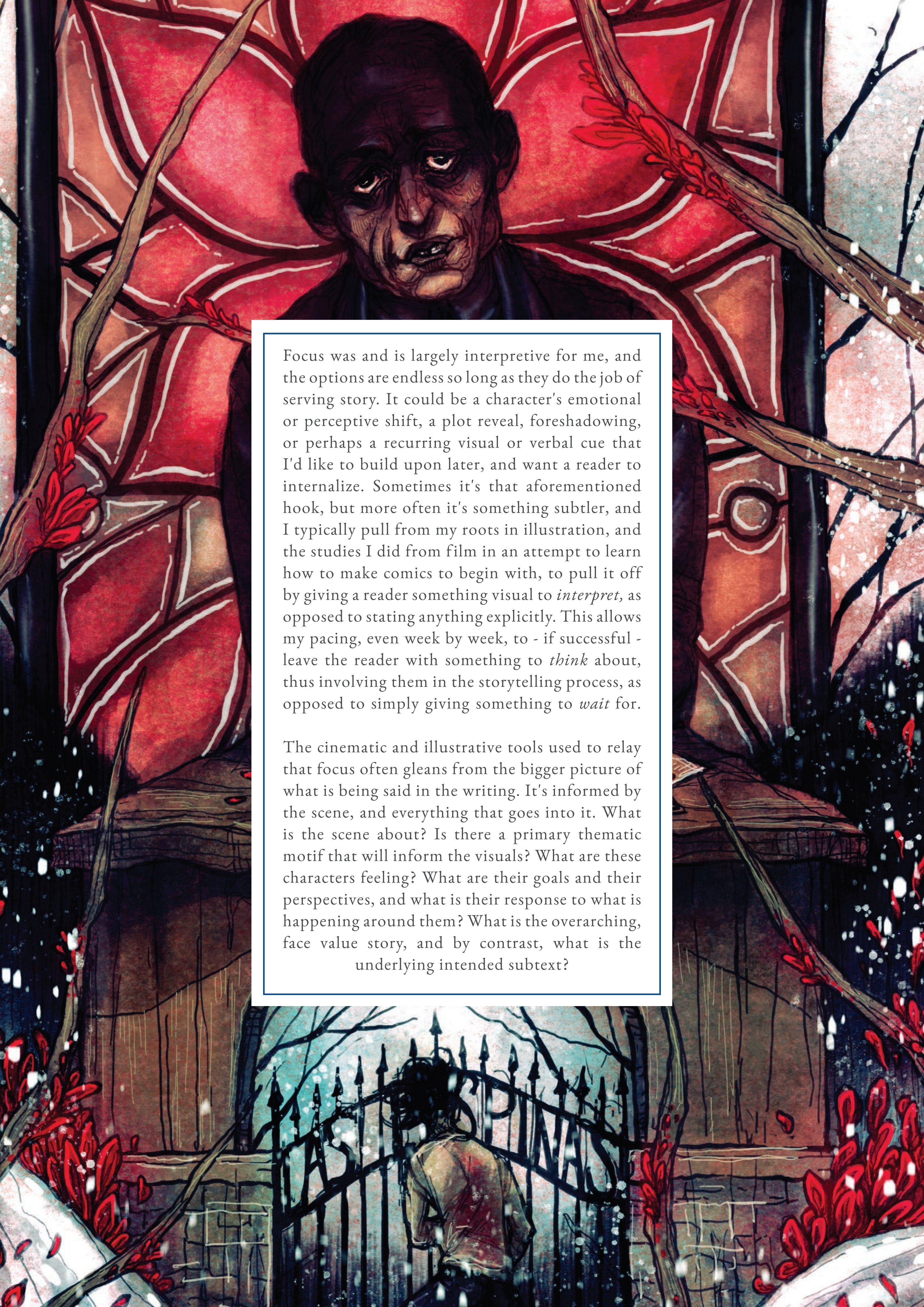
Each issue a professional takes us on a dive into their own part of the comics-making process. This month, webcomics artist CB Webb takes us into their process creating the beautiful Blanco.

BY CB WEBB

Webcomics are also slow things, but not to their detriment. The 'anyone and everyone' approach lends itself away from a set issue release schedule, and instead pages are typically shared as they're completed, often at an average of about a page or two a week. This inevitably presents a challenge for pacing, and requires some foresight in how any given creator should choose to prioritize their page content. Some focus on making sure that every page has a hook to maintain interest and give the reader something to chew on from week to week. Others opt to forego that advice with the knowledge that a week by week read is only temporary, and that the longest sitting form of their comic will eventually be in its completion, thus going for the floppy pacing convention, or just one that best suits the needs of the story.

I fell into the latter category with my webcomic, *Blanco*. Not because it was right (any option is, and can be done beautifully), but because it best suited the voice of the work. That said, in choosing to still publish in a webcomic format, there's still the long, drawn out posting schedule, and it seemed appropriate to borrow *something* from the former method. However, instead of focusing on a hook, I tried to maintain that every page had a focus.

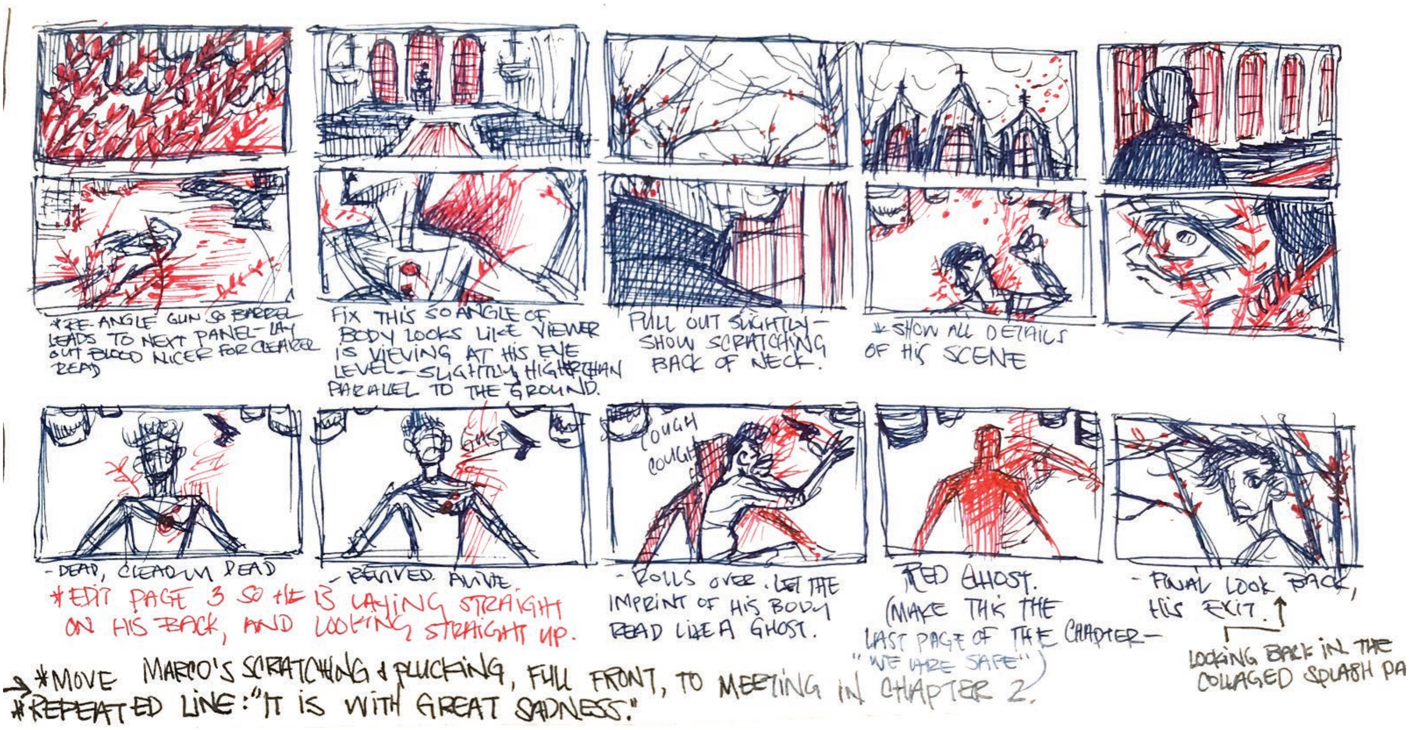




Focus was and is largely interpretive for me, and the options are endless so long as they do the job of serving story. It could be a character's emotional or perceptive shift, a plot reveal, foreshadowing, or perhaps a recurring visual or verbal cue that I'd like to build upon later, and want a reader to internalize. Sometimes it's that aforementioned hook, but more often it's something subtler, and I typically pull from my roots in illustration, and the studies I did from film in an attempt to learn how to make comics to begin with, to pull it off by giving a reader something visual to *interpret,* as opposed to stating anything explicitly. This allows my pacing, even week by week, to - if successful - leave the reader with something to *think* about, thus involving them in the storytelling process, as opposed to simply giving something to *wait* for.

The cinematic and illustrative tools used to relay that focus often gleans from the bigger picture of what is being said in the writing. It's informed by the scene, and everything that goes into it. What is the scene about? Is there a primary thematic motif that will inform the visuals? What are these characters feeling? What are their goals and their perspectives, and what is their response to what is happening around them? What is the overarching, face value story, and by contrast, what is the underlying intended subtext?

It's from those sorts of questions that key visuals can be developed, and, in the early stages of creation, it's those key visuals that I start with. My initial thumbnailing process has never been in page layouts, but in storyboards, particularly the few, major impact shots that are the facilitating visuals in moving the comic forward. Having those moments, or focus images, up front gives me an idea of how much space is needed around them, and informs every panel that leads up and falls away from them. They are essentially my beats, both structurally and as a functional heartbeat to the comic itself. If one of those beats isn't on a given page, then I know what I'm building towards in the panels that come before it, and it's an opportunity for me to utilize pacing to build tension, or to create an air or mystery, or a moment of exhale, before I get to the next.



*RE-ANGLE GUN SO BARREL LEADS TO NEXT PANEL - LAY OUT BLOOD NICER FOR CLEARER READ

FIX THIS SO ANGLE OF BODY LOOKS LIKE VIEWER IS VIEWING AT HIS EYE LEVEL - SLIGHTLY HIGHER THAN PARALLEL TO THE GROUND.

PULL OUT SLIGHTLY - SHOW SCRATCHING BACK OF NECK.

*SHOW ALL DETAILS OF HIS SCENE

- DEAD, CLEARLY DEAD

- REVIVED. ALIVE.

*EDIT PAGE 3 SO HE IS LAYING STRAIGHT ON HIS BACK, AND LOOKING STRAIGHT UP.

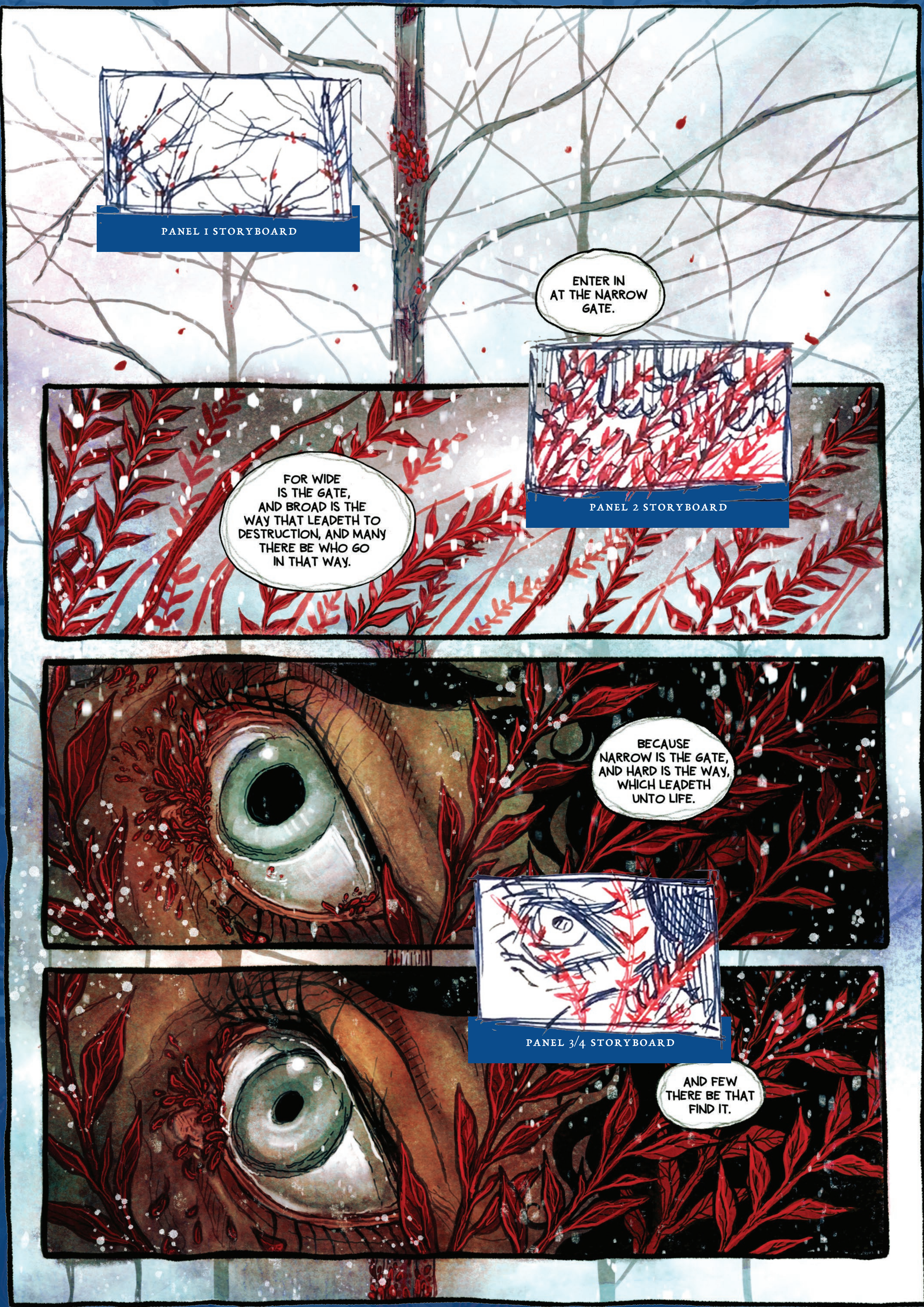
- ROLLS OVER. LET THE IMPRINT OF HIS BODY READ LIKE A GHOST.

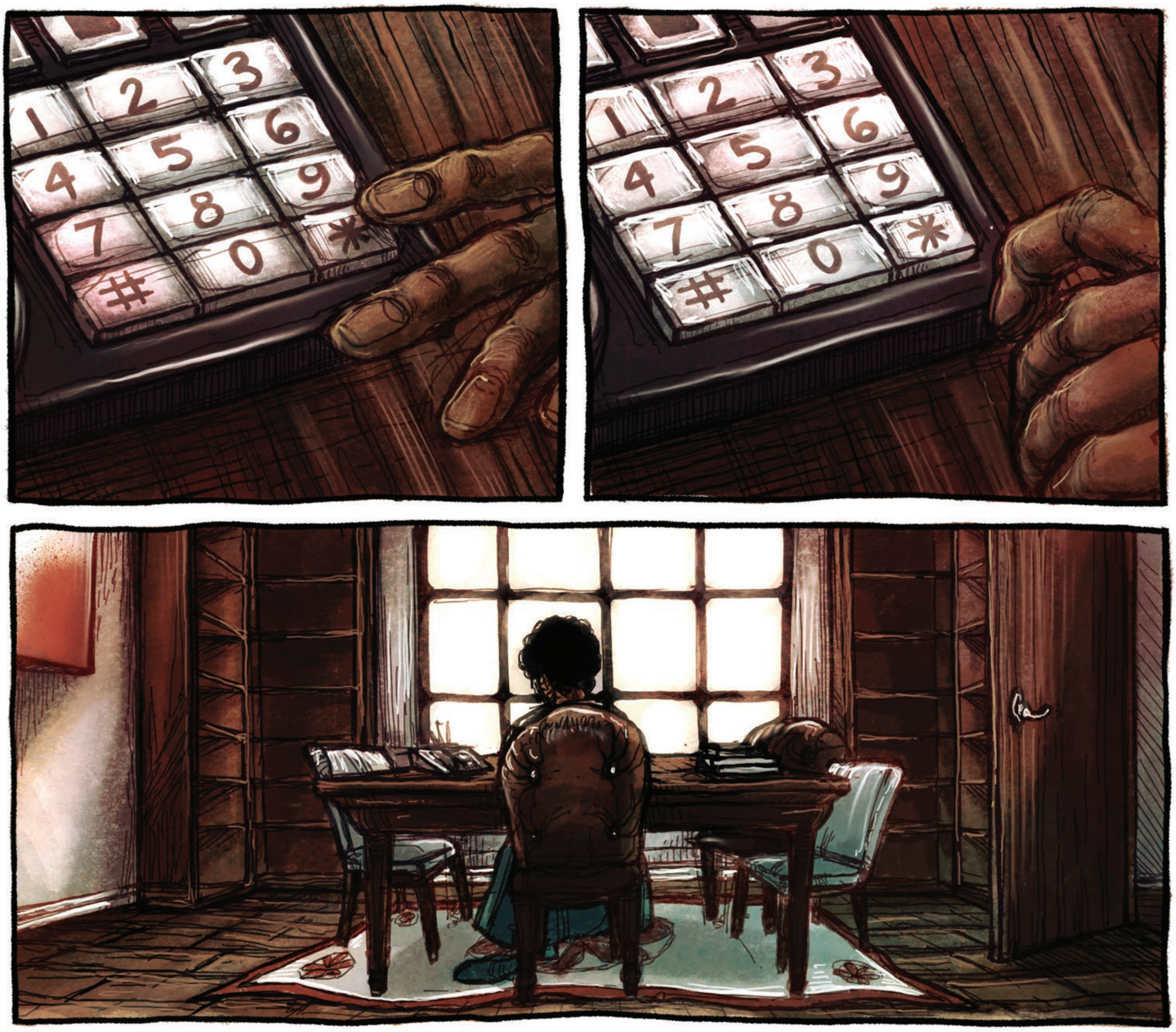
RED GHOST.
(MAKE THIS THE LAST PAGE OF THE CHAPTER -
"WE ARE SAFE")

- FINAL LOOK BACK, HIS EXIT.

LOOKING BACK IN THE COLLAGED SPLASH PA

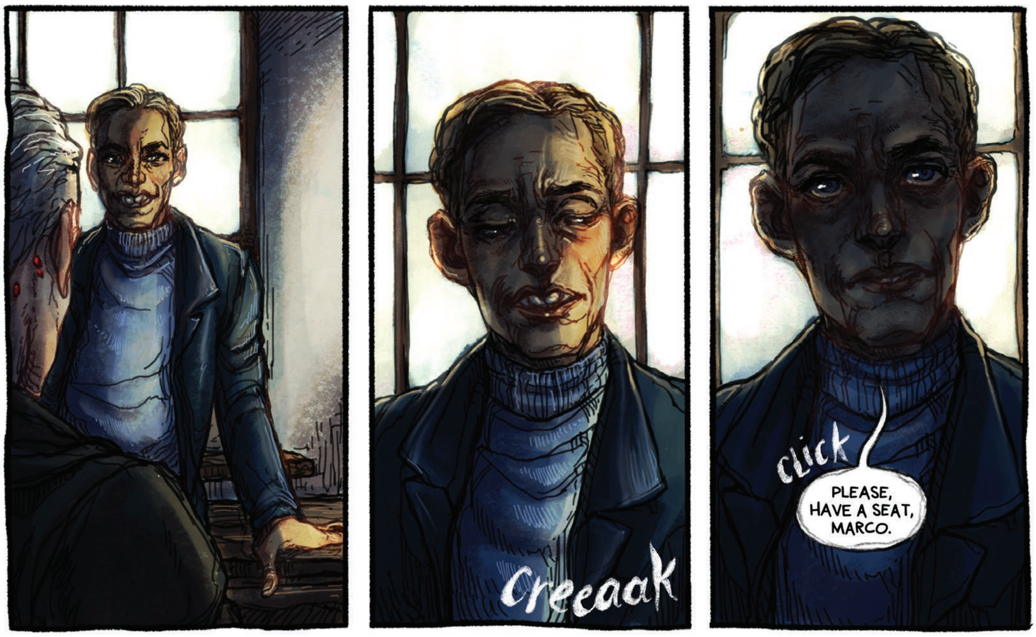
*MOVE MARCO'S SCRATCHING & PLUCKING, FULL FRONT, TO MEETING IN CHAPTER 2.
*REPEATED LINE: "IT IS WITH GREAT SADNESS."


PANEL 1 STORYBOARD
ENTER IN AT THE NARROW GATE.
PANEL 2 STORYBOARD
FOR WIDE IS THE GATE, AND BROAD IS THE WAY THAT LEADETH TO DESTRUCTION, AND MANY THERE BE WHO GO IN THAT WAY.
BECAUSE NARROW IS THE GATE, AND HARD IS THE WAY, WHICH LEADETH UNTO LIFE.
PANEL 3/4 STORYBOARD
AND FEW THERE BE THAT FIND IT.

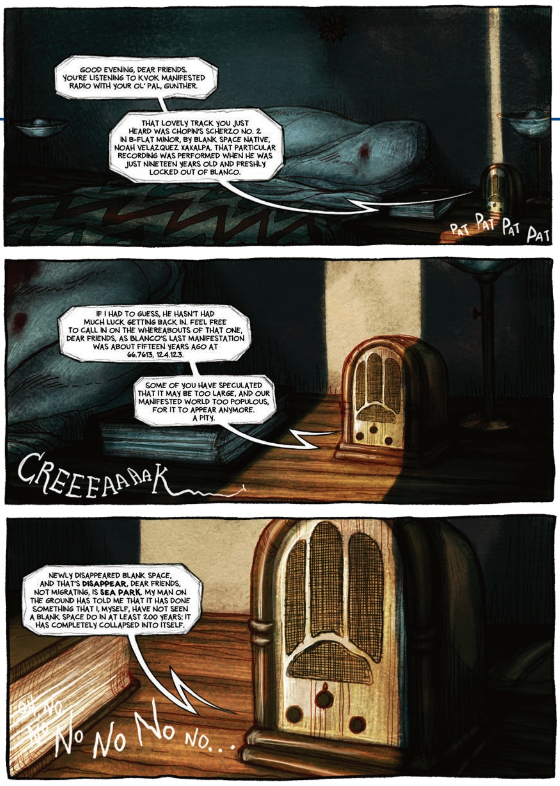


Blanco is a quieter story, especially as it builds, so it lends itself kindly to this approach and execution stylistically, especially in chapters that I choose to keep entirely silent (which I do often). I don't like to compromise my illustrative roots or how I draw for the comic, but that requires some groundwork for a more detailed and painterly style to read properly. I opt for large, airy panels because of this, often with no more than 4-5 to a page, sometimes less, to maintain legibility that could be lost by packing too much detail into smaller spaces. This creates a challenge in moving the story along at a pace that doesn't slow it down too much, but it does instead focus on the quality of panel content to say what is needed, as opposed to quantity. Like any comic, it's all about creating visuals that marry art and writing so that one cannot exist without the context of the other. So in going back to those aforementioned cinematic and illustrative tools, how do they get used to create that truly chewy focus moment for a reader that can leave them satisfied with a single page for a week? Can I relay a mood or atmosphere that gives importance to a shift in a character's perspective without explicitly saying so?

Can I use something as simple as the light of a closing door to emphasize building tension, or a sense of danger or threat that increases from panel to panel, when there is only line of dialogue that could be otherwise interpreted in any other way?

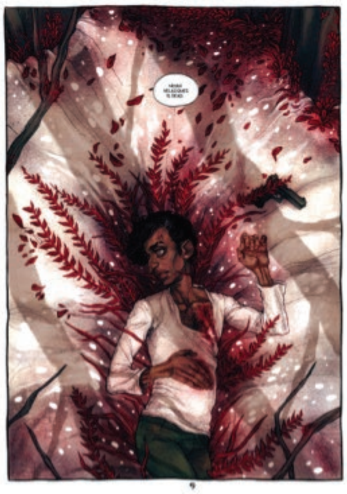
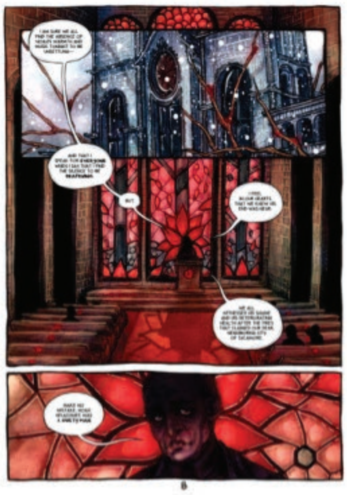
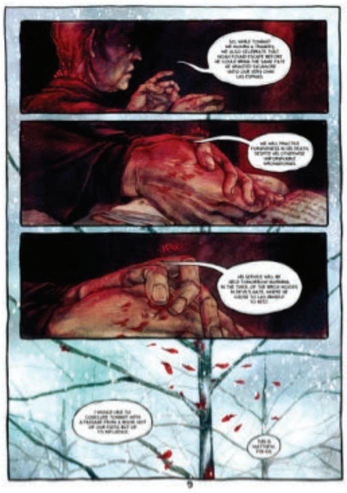
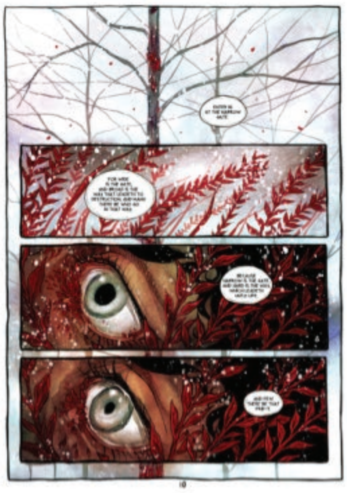
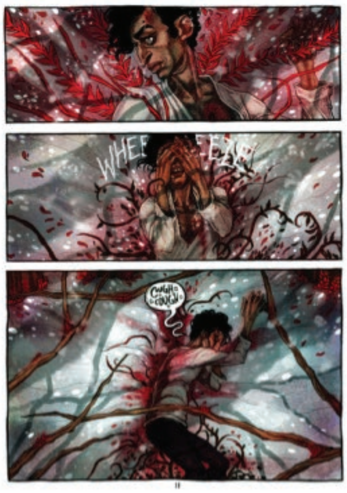
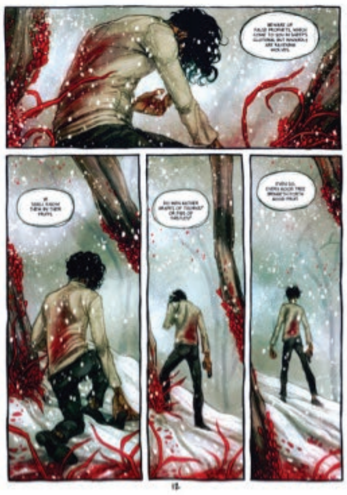
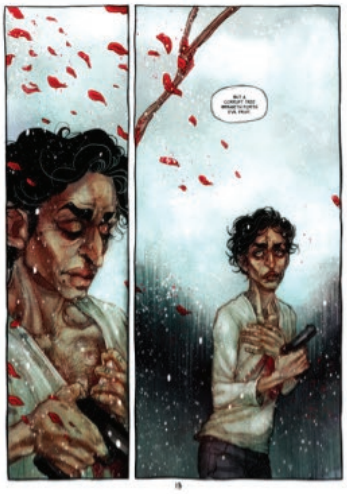
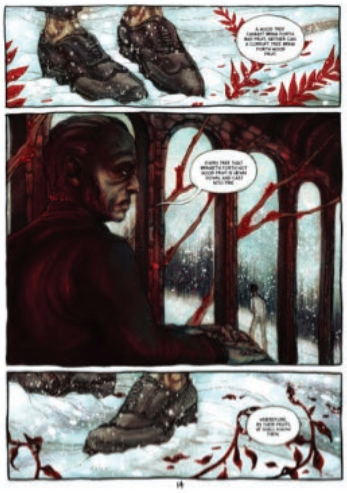
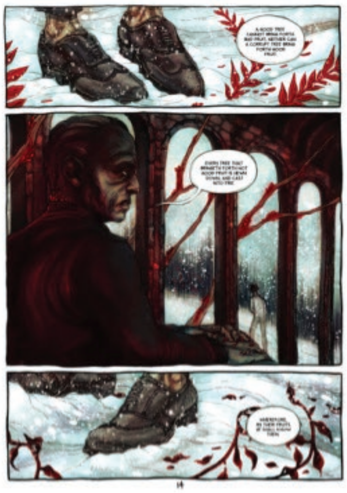
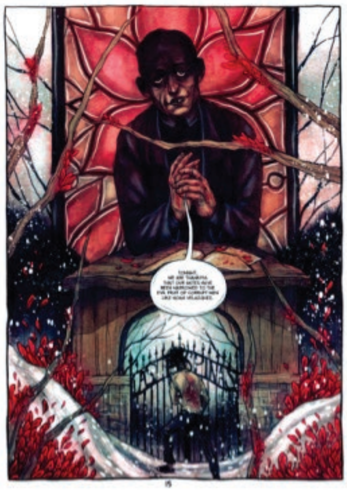
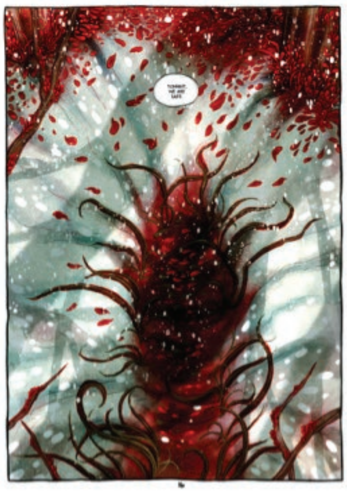

Creeaak
click
PLEASE, HAVE A SEAT, MARCO.

Or, can I make the same mechanic of light shining through a cracked door give an impression of mild horror when paired with a contrasting color scheme and a slow, uncomfortable zoom on a still object?


GOOD EVENING, DEAR FRIENDS. YOU'RE LISTENING TO KVOK MANIFESTED RADIO WITH YOUR OL' PAL, GUNTHER.
THAT LOVELY TRACK YOU JUST HEARD WAS CHOPIN'S SCHERZO NO. 2 IN B-FLAT MINOR, BY BLANK SPACE NATIVE, NOAH VELAZQUEZ XAXALPA. THAT PARTICULAR RECORDING WAS PERFORMED WHEN HE WAS JUST NINETEEN YEARS OLD AND FRESHLY LOCKED OUT OF BLANCO.
PAT PAT PAT PAT
IF I HAD TO GUESS, HE HASN'T HAD MUCH LUCK GETTING BACK IN. FEEL FREE TO CALL IN ON THE WHEREABOUTS OF THAT ONE, DEAR FRIENDS, AS BLANCO'S LAST MANIFESTATION WAS ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS AGO AT 66.7613, 124.123.
SOME OF YOU HAVE SPECULATED THAT IT MAY BE TOO LARGE, AND OUR MANIFESTED WORLD TOO POPULOUS, FOR IT TO APPEAR ANYMORE. A PITY.
CREEEAAAAK
NEWLY DISAPPEARED BLANK SPACE, AND THAT'S **DISAPPEAR**, DEAR FRIENDS, NOT MIGRATING, IS **SEA PARK**. MY MAN ON THE GROUND HAS TOLD ME THAT IT HAS DONE SOMETHING THAT I, MYSELF, HAVE NOT SEEN A BLANK SPACE DO IN AT LEAST 200 YEARS: IT HAS COMPLETELY COLLAPSED INTO ITSELF.
OH, NO, NO No No No NO...

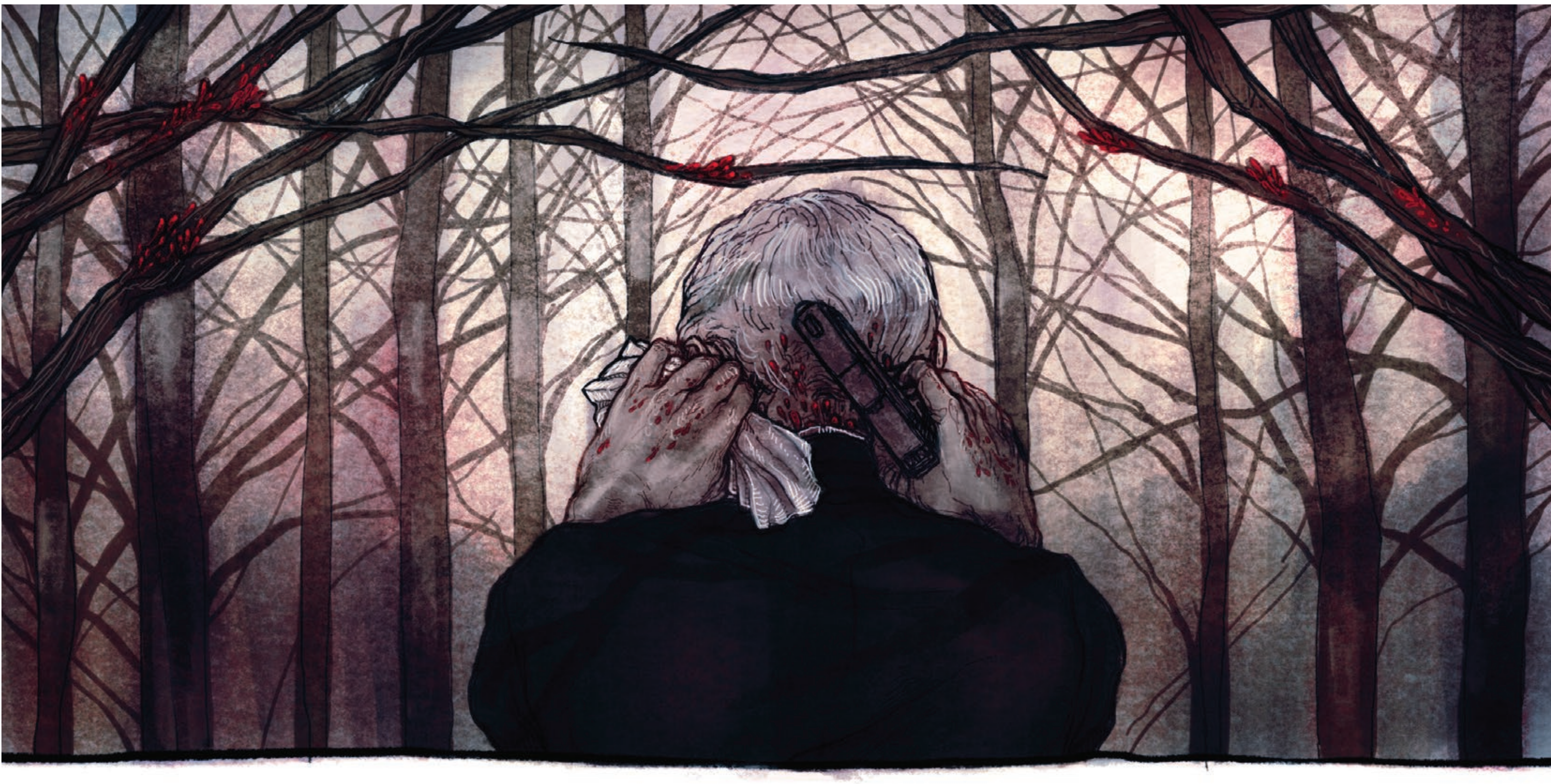
The possibilities are endless, and allow not only for a creator's unique voice to shine through with their choices, but for pages or panels to be engaging alone, and, when week by week has passed, to maintain an engaging whole.

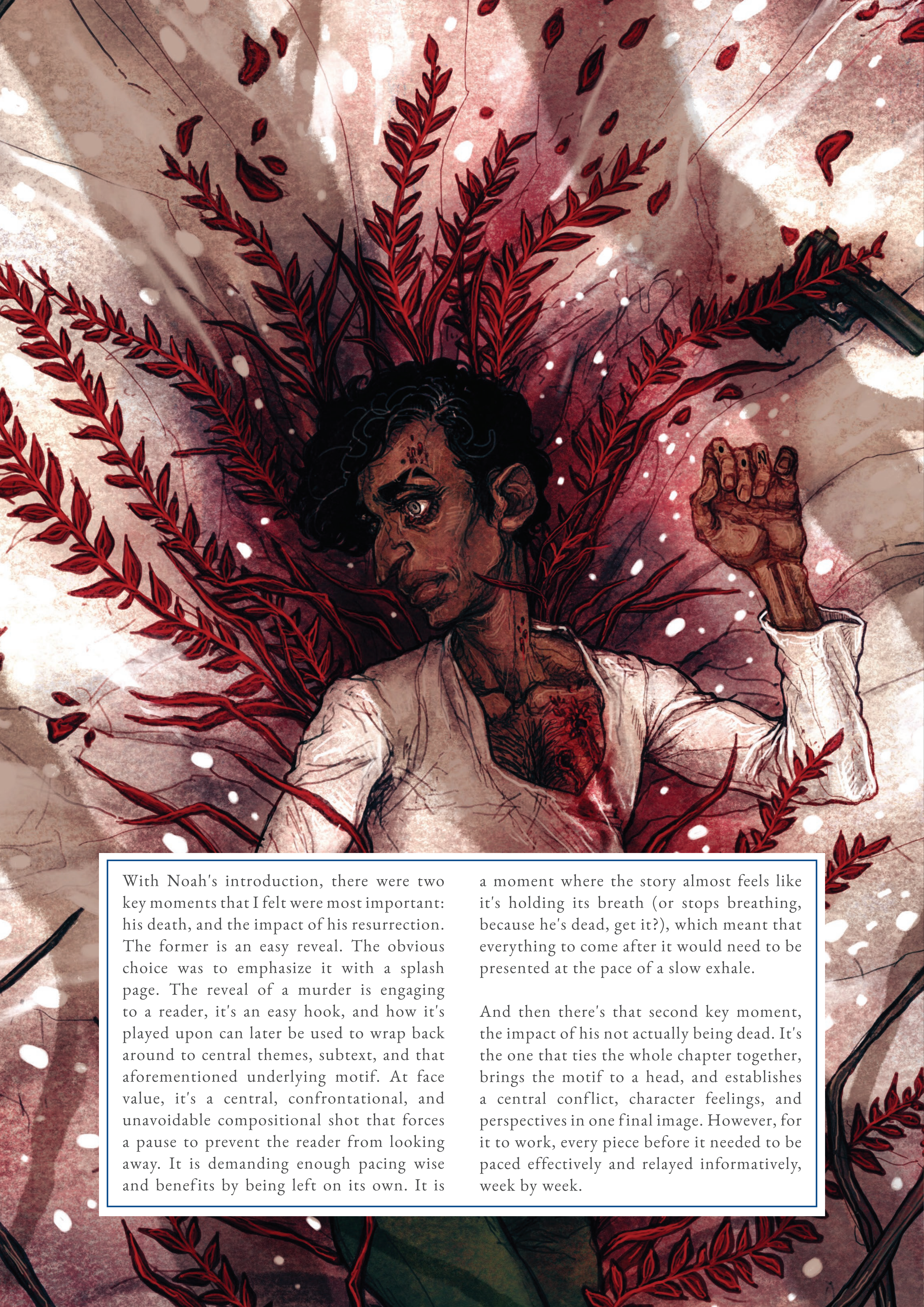
One of the questions I asked earlier was about visual motifs. Let's go back to that. I laid out the first chapter of *Blanco* with one motif in mind: Haunting. It tied everything together kindly, worked well with the face-value story aspects of a murdered man literally rising from the dead, and also informed how I wanted the two characters being introduced - the protagonist, Noah, and the antagonist, Marco - to play with each other on the page. The artwork tells a different story from the dialogue in chapter one, and relays two different character's perspectives simultaneously. By opting to show them together, the words of one character and the visual action of the other haunt each other back and forth, which created a natural groundwork for pacing, as there could be a steady shift from one character's truth to the other from page to page. This also, by default gave the reader something to chew on, since every page revealed a new contrast that needed to be pulled apart before growing into the opening's central conflict at the conclusion.

'Haunting' also helped to inform my visuals in answering a couple of those other questions that I previously asked: What are these characters feeling? What are their goals and their perspectives, and what is their response to what is happening around them?

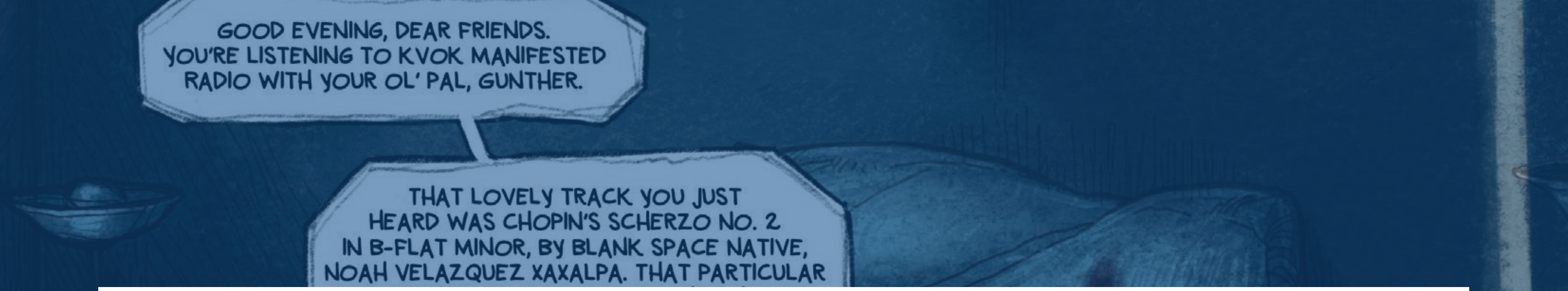
I started with Marco. Marco's voice is the only voice heard in the chapter, and in playing with the concept of conflicting imagery and dialogue, I wanted to create a dishonest face in him, and to do that, instead of showing it, I chose to consistently shroud it. I still needed to show a man with a conscience, and a man who was uncertain. In that instance, I felt that framing from the back and focusing only on body language by keeping his silhouette closed and tight relayed that notion. A key prop, the gun in his hand, is only shown in the second frame, and it allows for intrigue, and creates a question, especially when paired with the dialogue on the page. What is obscured to the reader also leads way for them to fill in the blanks and draw their own conclusions.

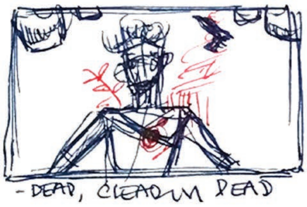


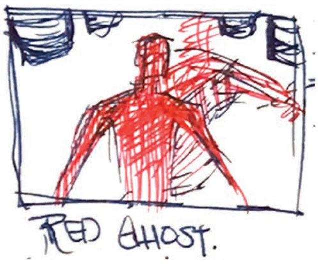


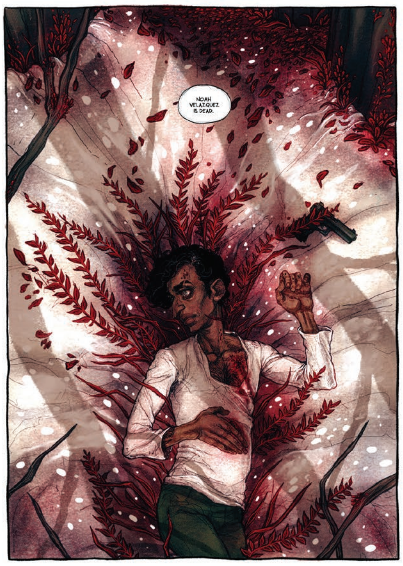
With Noah's introduction, there were two key moments that I felt were most important: his death, and the impact of his resurrection. The former is an easy reveal. The obvious choice was to emphasize it with a splash page. The reveal of a murder is engaging to a reader, it's an easy hook, and how it's played upon can later be used to wrap back around to central themes, subtext, and that aforementioned underlying motif. At face value, it's a central, confrontational, and unavoidable compositional shot that forces a pause to prevent the reader from looking away. It is demanding enough pacing wise and benefits by being left on its own. It is a moment where the story almost feels like it's holding its breath (or stops breathing, because he's dead, get it?), which meant that everything to come after it would need to be presented at the pace of a slow exhale.

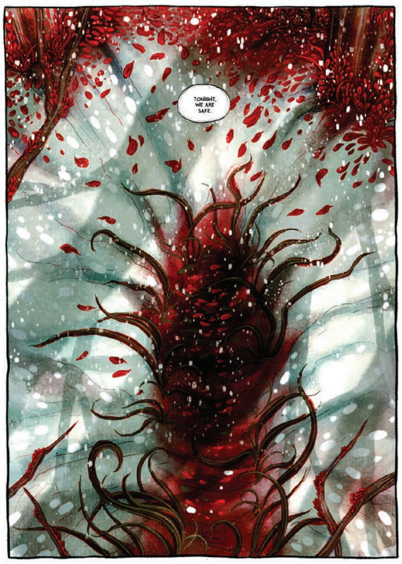
And then there's that second key moment, the impact of his not actually being dead. It's the one that ties the whole chapter together, brings the motif to a head, and establishes a central conflict, character feelings, and perspectives in one final image. However, for it to work, every piece before it needed to be paced effectively and relayed informatively, week by week.


GOOD EVENING, DEAR FRIENDS. YOU'RE LISTENING TO KVOK MANIFESTED RADIO WITH YOUR OL' PAL, GUNTHER.
THAT LOVELY TRACK YOU JUST HEARD WAS CHOPIN'S SCHERZO NO. 2 IN B-FLAT MINOR, BY BLANK SPACE NATIVE, NOAH VELAZQUEZ XAXALPA. THAT PARTICULAR


- DEAD, CLEAN DEAD




NOAH VELAZQUEZ IS DEAD.


TONIGHT, WE ARE SAFE.

And so, I let every couple of pages focus on perspective, and each character's truth playing against the other's. The first two are Marco's, unquestioned, and the next few are Noah's, questioning, with the final few pages joining them, in full conflict, on the page together, haunting each other. Visually, Marco's face remains skewed, he remains dishonest, and we never see him fully. He's huge, and he's looming, and he's cast in artificial red light shone through fragmented stained glass. Noah is grounded, exposed, and confrontational, lit in broad, soft, blue daylight and small in his surroundings. These visual decisions are intentional, and they tell a story and a subtext on their own. Together, they create a compelling contrast and inform framing, but ultimately, they're for the reader. They're more to read beyond the page. They tell a more layered story, and for a week, there's time to think more about what those layers are.

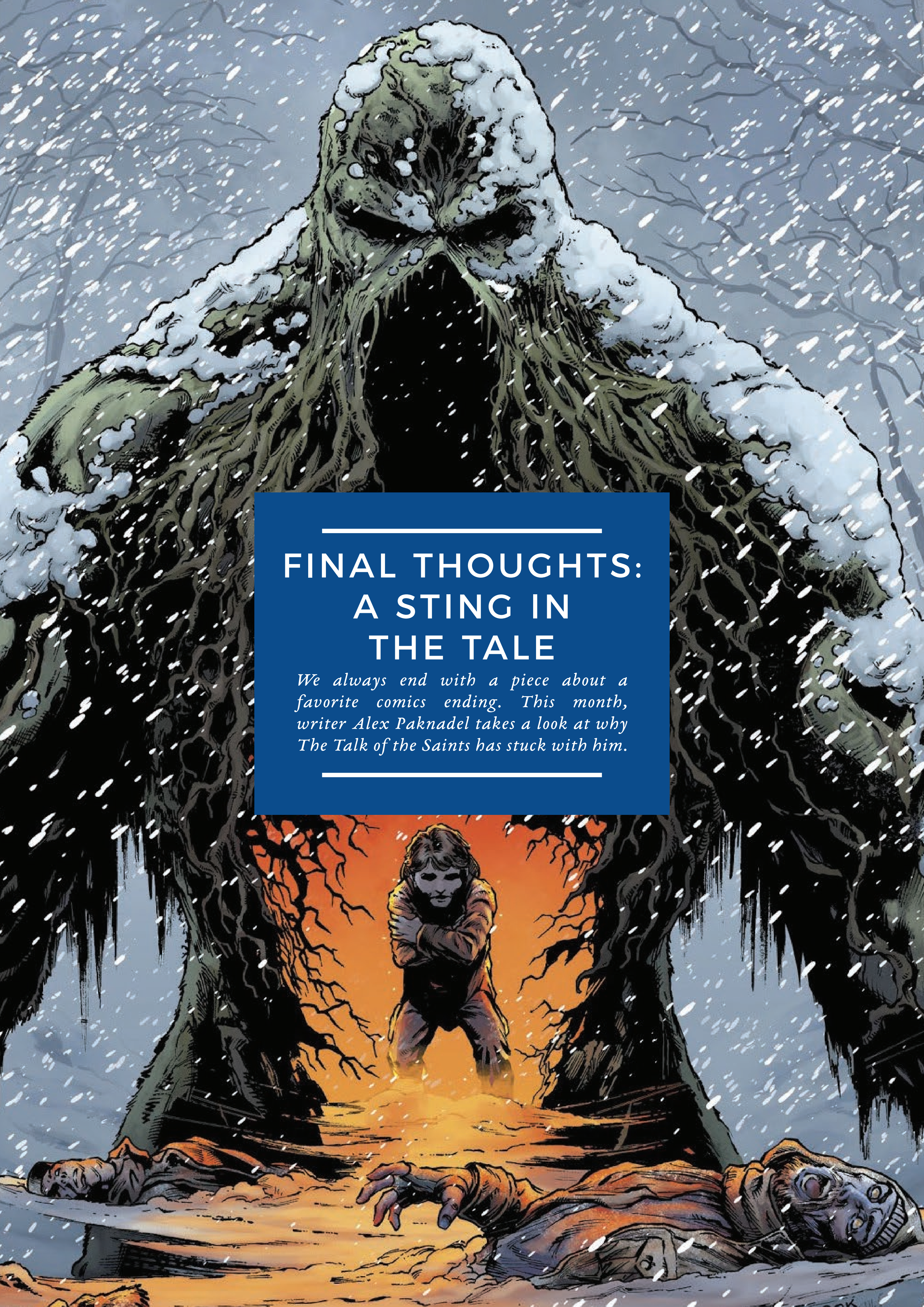
When I finally got to Noah's resurrection impact moment, I chose to make it a reversed mirror to the one of his death. Where the first was of Noah's body in full reveal, this one is of its absence, with only blood stained snow where his body once was. It's a red ghost, and it haunts. When tied with everything before it, the reader has its meaning and has interpreted it further than what they see on the page. Because they've been given pieces, with the benefit of slow and steady webcomics timing, they've engaged, and they've derived, that meaning successfully. It's something to chew on, and the slow, contemplative, single pump heartbeat of a pace week by week not only makes it worth it, but makes it work.

This article was originally featured in our Blackbird *issue, #19. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO19*

NO
THE
SO
A BLANK SPACE DO IN AT LEAST 200 YEA
HAS COMPLETELY COLLAPSED INTO ITSE
Oh, No
No
No No No No...

FINAL THOUGHTS: A STING IN THE TALE

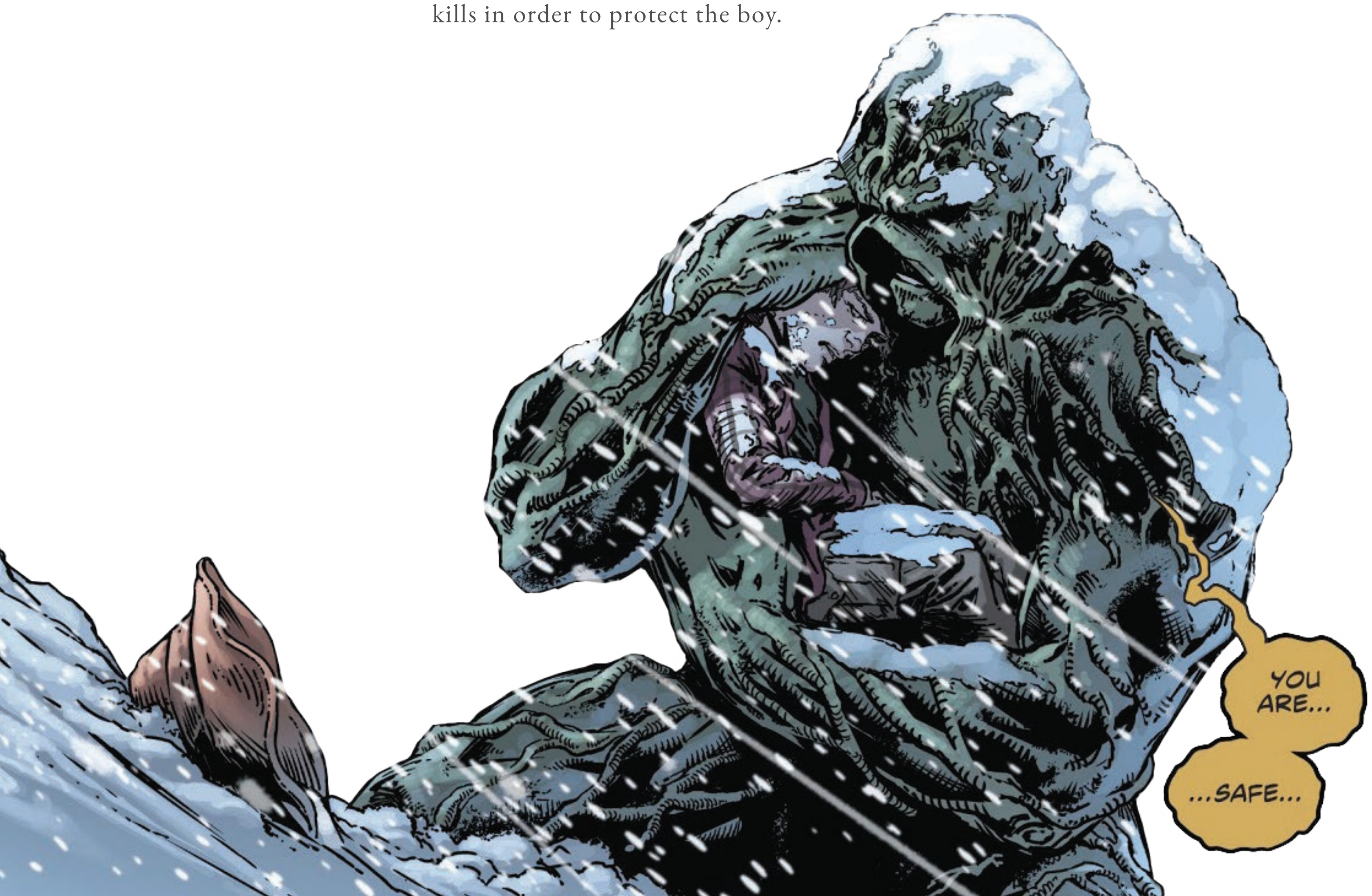
We always end with a piece about a favorite comics ending. This month, writer Alex Paknadel takes a look at why The Talk of the Saints has stuck with him.



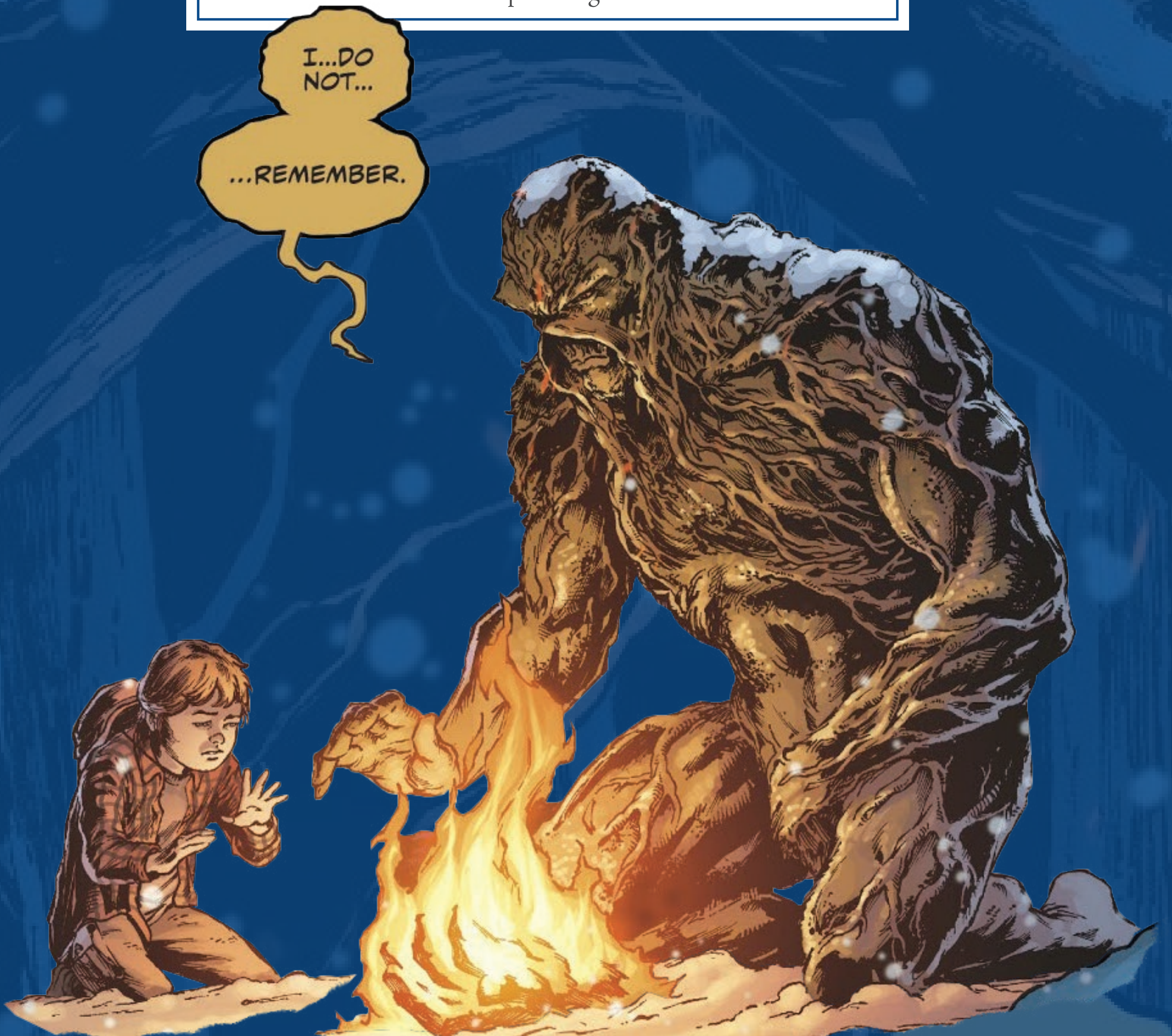
BY ALEX PAKNADEL

Last year's *Swamp Thing Winter Special* comprised two full-length stories, one of which - an oppressive, elegiac piece by Tom King and Jason Fabok titled 'The Talk Of The Saints' - compelled me to do something I rarely do with comics if I'm honest: I reread it. Then I read it again, and bought a bunch of copies for my friends.

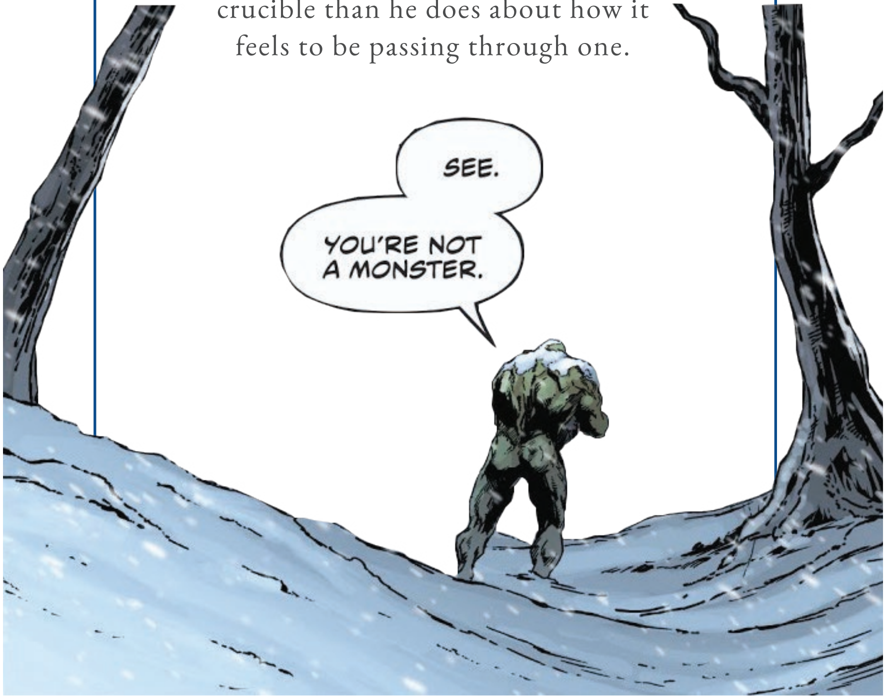
The story is deceptively simple: an emaciated Swamp Thing is searching fruitlessly for the Green (the collective unconscious of Earth's plant kingdom) in a seemingly endless winter. The earth elemental's task is made doubly difficult by his defective memory - a consequence of his separation from the Green. Accompanying him on this quest is an unnamed, helpless boy who constantly reminds him that they're both in flight from 'the snow monster' - an unseen Big Other purportedly responsible for the world's fallen state. The unlikely pair encounter wild beasts and wilder humans driven to cannibalism by the brutal conditions, most of whom the Swamp Thing kills in order to protect the boy.


YOU ARE...
...SAFE...

The topic of their firelit conversations is usually the nature of monsters and monstrosity, with the boy reassuring the Swamp Thing that he is a good man and not the plodding deformity the rest of the world sees. However, this *Lone Wolf and Cub* dynamic is brutally subverted in the closing pages when the Swamp Thing realizes - apparently not for the first time - that the boy is the very snow monster they have spent years - possibly even decades - attempting to elude. At once sinister and pitiful, the boy has exploited the Swamp Thing's amnesia to forge a familial bond with him, manipulating him into expending every last drop of his elemental powers in an effort to escape the snow monster's clutches. In other words, the Swamp Thing has been desperately trying to protect, and even cherish, the very monster that has scoured the Green from the earth. At the story's climax, a tearful Swamp Thing kills the boy - an audaciously subdued sequence which pointedly withholds the cathartic reveal of the monster's true form - and then dies himself. The snow then recedes around the Swamp Thing's corpse, giving way to green shoots and a florid rebirth of the Green, which naturally enough includes the Swamp Thing himself.



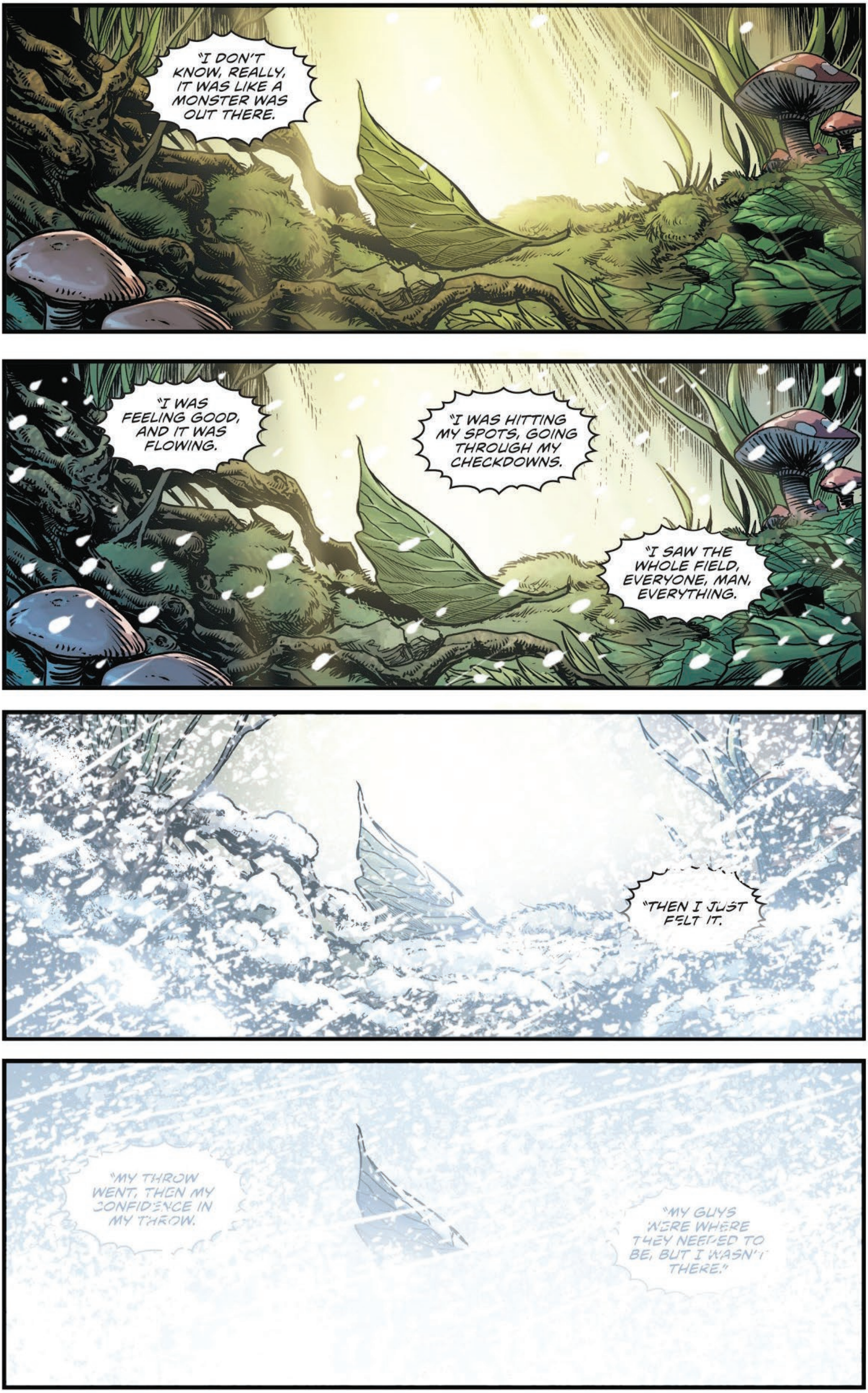
'The Talk Of The Saints' plays out like a medieval folk tale, placing it squarely in the realm of myth rather than allegory. The boundary between the two is highly porous of course, but whereas allegory often pertains to abstract social and political phenomena (e.g. Bulgakov's 'Master and Margarita'), myth addresses eternal human verities and psychological truths (e.g. Orpheus' descent into the underworld). I believe this is because an attempt is being made to process the crisis of liberal democracy we are facing without turning it into a tedious harangue. As in the triumphant *Mister Miracle,* King is less concerned with the reality-warping sadism of demagogues than he is with the question of how - and if - we survive them. This 'mythic inclination' (which is present in other recent mainstream comics as well) eschews direct parallels with current events in favor of a more expressionistic, and arguably more durable, approach. In other words, it is possible that King cares less about the minutiae of our democratic crucible than he does about how it feels to be passing through one.



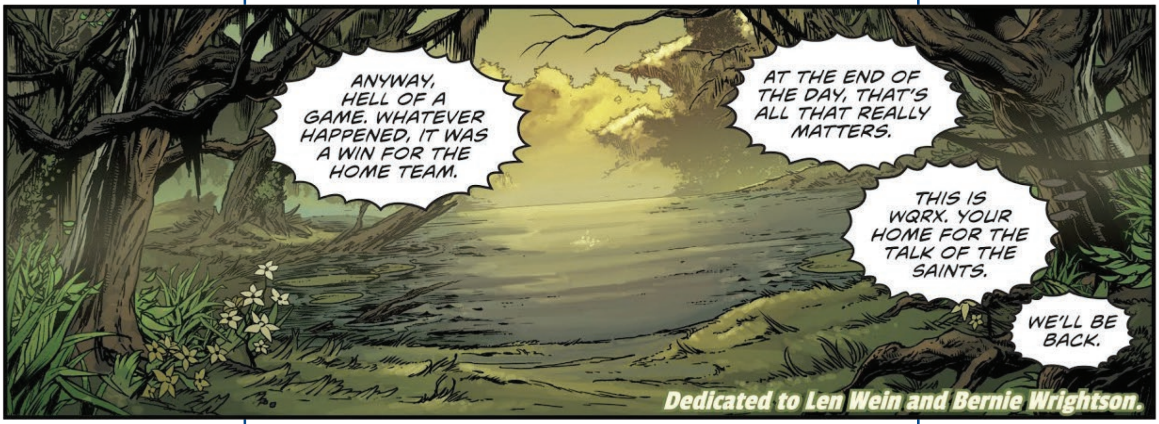
Unlike allegory (which is by no means the inferior literary device), myth does not generally seek to attach itself to an abstract political reality. It is a more plastic and equivocal form, so I won't attempt to stake out too much interpretive space here; however, it is my contention that the thesis of 'The Talk Of The Saints' is available in capsule form in the sports commentary which bookends the story. It opens and closes with a 'WQRX' radio sports commentator's account of a football game in which the Gotham Knights have suffered a heavy loss due to a poor second half performance from quarterback Chris Campbell. His attempts to justify his poor performance, diegetically obscured by the blizzard whipping across the panels, ring woefully hollow: "I kept missing. I was on the ground looking up, and I knew... it was a monster. The monster got me." The action then unfolds as outlined above, but as the Green reasserts itself during the story's coda, the commentary comes in again - this time with a coruscatingly hot take likely inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's stirring first inaugural address: "There's no such thing as monsters! They don't exist! All right?! All you do, that's on you! You want to blame someone?! Look in a mirror, people, what do you see?! There's nothing to be afraid of. Okay? The only monster out there is you."

This unflinching commentary, whose pertinence to our extraordinary political moment cannot be overstated, is, I propose, an adapted form of Greek chorus. In classical tragedy, the chorus existed as an intermediary between the audience and the play, commenting on context, themes and character motivations. Although the adapted chorus here is more oblique than anything found in Aeschylus or Sophocles, our impression of 'The Talk Of The Saints' is shaped and channelled by it nonetheless. This makes for a less intrusive and prescriptive framing device than, for instance, the expository opening newsflash that became ubiquitous in comics in the wake of *DKR* and *American Flagg*. King has employed it elsewhere, but never to such quietly devastating effect.

There is a sting in the tale, however.


"I DON'T KNOW, REALLY, IT WAS LIKE A MONSTER WAS OUT THERE.
"I WAS FEELING GOOD, AND IT WAS FLOWING.
"I WAS HITTING MY SPOTS, GOING THROUGH MY CHECKDOWNS.
"I SAW THE WHOLE FIELD, EVERYONE, MAN, EVERYTHING.
"THEN I JUST FELT IT.
"MY THROW WENT, THEN MY CONFIDENCE IN MY THROW.
"MY GUYS WERE WHERE THEY NEEDED TO BE, BUT I WASN'T THERE."

The final line of both the commentary and the tale, which accompanies a series of haunting moment-to-moment transitions depicting the revivified Swamp Thing wading back into the teeming swamp, is, "we'll be back." This parting flourish injects a desperately needed note of optimism into proceedings, and in a manner which underscores why the Swamp Thing - a pagan fertility god masquerading as a B-movie monster - the perfect choice for a myth of traumatic national renewal. "Twice-born," like Dionysus before him (a cycle of death and rebirth is a feature common to most fertility deities), the Swamp Thing can never truly die; he can merely lie dormant, his chilled fronds twitching in anticipation of a blessed spring.


ANYWAY, HELL OF A GAME. WHATEVER HAPPENED, IT WAS A WIN FOR THE HOME TEAM.
AT THE END OF THE DAY, THAT'S ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS.
THIS IS WQRX. YOUR HOME FOR THE TALK OF THE SAINTS.
WE'LL BE BACK.
Dedicated to Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson.

This article was originally featured in our Blackbird *issue, #19. You can find the full issue at: gum.co/PXPNO19*

Thanks for reading the sampler issue of *PanelxPanel*. Please let us know any feedback, suggestions, and letters to the editor via panelxpanel@hassanoe.co.uk

Next time, we discuss the Image Comics series by Ed Brubaker, Sean Phillips and Jacob Phillips: *Criminal.*

May 29th.
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